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Committed to Human Rights and Community Development

PRESS RELEASE

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Fall of Elephant Pass underscores again the importance of a negotiated settlement

The capture of the strategic military complex **Iyakachchi** and **Elephant Pass** bases - in Jaffna by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on 22 April has generated widespread debate within and outside Sri Lanka on the current peace initiatives and the future of the island.

The Sri Lankan government, led by President Chandrika Kumaratunge has failed to win the confidence of the people to achieve peace. Its cavalier attitude towards Tamil rights and peace negotiations in 1995 and the importance given to military aspects, led to the collapse of the peace talks, resulting in a drawn out war, causing heavy destruction of life and waste of human and economic resources. Although President Chandrika and her government gained power on a peace platform, she declared a new policy which she referred to as "peace through war", which has only provided a fertile ground for forces who have no interest in peace or the development of humanity, to flourish.

The government gave priority to war, while placing the entire blame on the LTTE, and directed its energy and resources at its disposal towards a military solution. The government also sought to convince the international community, through Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, that the annihilation of the LTTE was the only way forward. Mr Kadirgamar went a step further, denigrating the entire expatriate Tamil community, attacking refugees and attempting to further widen the gulf between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities outside Sri Lanka. Unexpectedly, the combination of the attempt at a military solution and massive violation of human rights in Sri Lanka and the direct attacks on the Tamils abroad has led to more support for the LTTE among the expatriate Tamil community.

The government has used the Emergency to cover-up the massive-scale human rights abuses against the Tamil community and has imposed censorship to prevent news about the war reaching the general population, particularly the Sinhalese people and foreign countries. The government and military news releases have always misrepresented, distorted or fabricated the real situation in the battlefield to deceive the people. This has led to a psychological build-up of expectations within the Sinhalese community and the community now finds it difficult to come to terms with reality.

The government has been so successful in propaganda among the international community that even officers of foreign governments had begun to openly suggest that constitutional reforms could be implemented after the LTTE is destroyed. The plea of the Tamil community, which bore the brunt of the military thrusts of the government, for 'priority to

'peace' has always been ignored. The military victories of the LTTE have no doubt shocked even some of the governments.

The Norwegian involvement in peace has not only been welcomed by the Tamils in Sri Lanka, but has also received widespread support within the Tamil diaspora. The Norwegian offer of shuttle diplomacy between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE also received support from the Sri Lankan Government. Since January 2000, there have been a number of demonstrations by Tamils in northeast Sri Lanka and in foreign capitals, demanding peace. Although most Sinhalese people are said to support peace, many Sinhalese organisations, particularly, the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT), Sinhala Veeravidhana and the Sinhala Urumaya, are vehemently opposing any peace negotiation, constitutional reform or devolution and have called for the total elimination of the LTTE. They refuse to accept that there is a long-standing Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka and continue to stress that there remains only a terrorist problem.

These organisations have gone to the extent of carrying out demonstrations before the Norwegian embassy and resorting to the reprehensible act of burning the Norwegian national flag. The Tamil Information Centre understands that important ministers and high officers in the government control these organisations. These organisations, particularly the Veeravidhana, are also carrying out a virulent campaign against Tamils living in southern Sri Lanka. They are disrupting social, cultural, political and other events of the Tamil people and are urging the Sinhalese people to sever all contacts with the Tamils, particularly in business. The activities of these organisations are causing extreme concern among the Hill Country Tamils.

Four of these organisations, including the National Joint Committee, have demanded that Sri Lanka must remain a unitary state, discriminatory provisions in the current constitution relating to the Sinhala national anthem, Sinhalese national flag and Buddhism must continue, the merged northern and eastern provinces must be divided, provincial councils must be abolished and there should be no devolution of power whatsoever. These demands undermine the existence of the ethnic minorities in the island and reject their right to self-determination and other fundamental rights. The Buddhist Maha Sangha too has joined these organisations in opposing the Norwegian peace initiative, devolution and talks with the LTTE and against the fundamental principles of Buddhism, is promoting war. There is no doubt that this trend will spell further disaster for Sri Lanka.

Within Sri Lanka, the Sinhala and English mainstream media has played a major role in whipping up anti-Tamil sentiments. News reports and commentaries, in most part have not been objective, tending to project hard-line majority viewpoints on the Tamil question and promoting a military solution. They also attempt to create the perception that they represent the sentiments of the overwhelming majority.

The main opposition United National Party (UNP) is making an all-out attempt to make use of the Elephant Pass debacle for its own political advantage without any consideration for a solution to the conflict or the plight of civilians caught-up in the war. UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe clearly implies that his party would have done much better in the war and adopted successful military methods. Opposition parties have always placed insurmountable obstacles in the path to peace since independence and the UNP seems to continue that shameful tradition.

What is required now are the vision, will and the readiness of the government and the opposition to shift from their entrenched positions, recognise the importance of peace and make genuine efforts to replace force by negotiations to bring about a just and lasting solution to the Tamil problem.

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