

## Opening Speech

### Verena Graf

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Allow me to say a few words about LIDLIP, the organization I represent at the United Nations. It is a peoples' rights organization, dealing with collective rights as distinguished from individual rights, therefore it stands for peoples, groups, communities, etc. In fact, the International League for the Rights of Peoples (LIDLIP) has been engaged for almost three decades in international fora not least in the United Nations and especially in the Commission on Human Rights. Today, it is in the Human Rights Council and other United Nations bodies, where we support the struggle of peoples around the world for liberation from oppression. Despite ups and downs, we have kept hope that at last rhetoric will be translated into action, collective human rights will prevail. Today, again, we witness outright regression. Military might has replaced justice, an unqualified fight against 'terrorism' the struggle for freedom, consideration of state security the advancement of human rights.

In the course of the years, I have myself got to know many Tamils, men and women, whole families, personalities, to mention just one: G.G. Ponnambalam, but also grass-roots people, that is to say Tamils of all walks of life; some I got the chance to meet only once, because time did not allow to meet again: they were assassinated.

LIDLIP has been aware of the situation in Sri Lanka, in particular of the Tamil armed struggle, since 1986 and has ever since taken up the issue in the human rights fora.

Based on historical and socio-political evidence, LIDLIP and other organizations have always argued that the Sri Lankan Tamils fulfill all the criteria to qualify as a people. Not only a common culture, language and religion but also a typical traditional settlement area, a shared history and democratically expressed will characterize them as a nation. Moreover, they share the experience of a people that has been systematically and collectively discriminated against, even persecuted in independent Sri Lanka.

Still today, and perhaps more than ever, it is important that NGOs take up this issue and spread information in the international field, in the United Nations, in the media, and wherever possible, precisely because there is often a blackout of news from Sri Lanka. When it is not a blackout, it is often misinformation. Press freedom and freedom of expression are in danger in Sri Lanka; journalists are arrested, tortured, abducted, disappeared and killed. Misinformation is massively used internally and internationally by the government to distort the real picture of what is happening in conflict areas. The major news we get here in Europe, are about the LTTE recruiting child soldiers, the harsh rule and warfare of the LTTE. But nobody acknowledges that there is a war, a war which is not recognized. It is not sufficient that the Sri Lankan governmental delegation overwhelms Room XVII with its luxury colour printed folders to give a picture of the situation reigning in Sri Lanka and this to create opinion. It is not sufficient, because one part is missing; like any coin, there are two sides. Yes, there is a war, a unrecognized war. One of our organization's specific approaches to situations is to go to the root causes, to the origin of a conflict. But the topic of today's seminar is another; therefore I shall not dwell on the deep reason of this ongoing conflict.

The Tamil people, not only suffered the tsunami, they still suffer the lack of aid, because it is the Sri Lankan Government that received foreign aid and decides on its distribution. It is the gatekeeper that at its discretion determines access and itinerary even of foreign dignitaries to

the country, as the former UN Secretary General (Kofi Annan) had to witness when he was prevented from visiting the tsunami affected Northeast of Sri Lanka,

The media for instance hardly speak about the murdering of religious leaders and laymen; news has hardly spoken about the assassination of Joseph Pararajasingham, an elected member of Parliament (TNA) while attending Christmas eve mass in St. Mary's Cathedral in Batticaloa in 2005, and many other human rights defenders.

The media rarely speak about the disastrous situation of the people suffering from lack of food, water and other essential items, of the hundreds of thousands of displaced people without shelter and access to health care. An ongoing humanitarian crisis which lasts and no longer arouses any emotion, also because unknown.

A ceasefire systematically disadvantages the non-state actor. The international community, including many human rights organizations, favour the state. Thus, despite being signatory to the two 1966 Conventions on Human Rights and having ratified the 4th Geneva Convention, successive governments of Sri Lanka are responsible for collective punishment of the Tamils, of having indiscriminately bombed schools, refugee camps, and churches, of having blocked food and medical supplies to the population in the Northeast. The LTTE is criminalized as a terrorist organization, proscribed in several countries, whereas nobody accuses Sri Lanka of state terrorism. Therefore a basic and profound asymmetry has been established between the official government and the oppressed. The asymmetry between a government and a freedom movement proves particularly disadvantageous for cease fire agreements and negotiations because the official Government alone is treated as representing the State.

But enough talking of war and hardship, let us go for negotiations. We must push for negotiations and get the parties to the negotiation table. The international community must stand up for a just negotiated solution.

While it is true that it is primarily up to the Sri Lankans to find a route to a just peace, the international community can not absolve itself of a certain responsibility for the deterioration of the situation, even systemic impasse.

If the decision of the Sri Lankan Government to invite UN rapporteurs, the High Commissioner and other visitors is welcome, the peoples cannot wait until reports are drafted, published and adopted, they must live now, they wish to live in peace and all peoples have the right to live in peace.