

**Remarks on occasion of receiving the Bishop Tji Hak Soon Justice and Peace Award
21st April 2009, Seoul, Republic of Korea**

Ruki Fernando, Sri Lanka

It is a great honour for me to receive the Bishop Tji Hak Soon Justice and Peace award. Especially because I have been inspired by the life and work of Bishop Tji Hak Soon, his struggles against injustice and his courage to struggle against military dictatorship despite imprisonment.

In Sri Lanka too, I have encountered and worked with people like Bishop Tji Hak Soon. As I stand here and speak, some of these people are in detention, some without charges, some like long time activist and human rights defender Tissainayagam, detained for writing about killing of civilians, child soldiers and generally for highlighting human rights violations. Some have been killed. Some have been abducted, or simply disappeared. Many have been threatened, intimidated, ridiculed. Several colleagues have fled the country. I myself have not been spared such problems, and consider myself fortunate to be alive, and free to a certain extent.

What have we done to deserve this? Because we opposed bombing and shelling civilians, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, forcible displacement, restrictions on freedom of movement, restrictions on fishing & farming, occupation of land, forcible recruitment of children, attacks on freedom of expression. Because we believe safety and needs of civilians are more important than military victories and advocate political and negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict, instead of a military solution. Because we put our faith in non violent actions, rule of law, and that respect for human rights is the best way to prevent and counter terrorism.

Amongst those who have struggled and continue to struggle to change this situation are victims of abuses, their family members, journalists, lawyers, humanitarian workers, religious leaders, parliamentarians, some members of the international community. Three Catholic priests, a Buddhist Monk and several Hindu priests have been killed and disappeared in NorthEast of the country since 2006. Many of them were working to help and protect displaced people, documenting human rights abuses and working to promote ethnic harmony. Churches and hospitals have been bombed and shelled, and people taking refuge in these places have been killed and injured.

I have met family members of those killed and disappeared, and had met people and families being detained. I have no words to describe their agony and pain. I don't know how to describe my own agony, pain, shame and sense of helplessness when I talk with them. Tamils are an ethnic minority in Sri Lanka, but the majority of people displaced, killed, disappeared, arrested and detained without charges are Tamil. Almost all civilians who have been killed and injured in the ongoing military operations in the North, to whom, adequate food, water, medicine, shelter etc. is not been sent, are Tamil. So, despite rhetorical statements, I can't help wonder that that there is a war against Tamil civilians or at least they have suffered disproportionately.

The Sri Lankan Government is either involved in these abuses, or unable and unwilling to prevent these. And it is also unwilling or unable to take action against those responsible. It is also not willing to accept international assistance offered towards this.

Like the Government, the LTTE clearly has blood on its hands. Sinhalese and Muslims have suffered terribly, primarily at the hands of the LTTE, who chased away the Muslim community from the North, massacred Buddhist Monks and Sinhalese villages, set off bombs in places of religious worship, buses, trains and other public places. The Tamil community has also suffered under the LTTE – forcible recruitment, including very young children, travel restrictions, and threats and killing of Tamils who have dissenting views from the LTTE.

However, it is important to note that the LTTE is about 30 years old, and discrimination and harassment of the Tamil community is more than 50 years old. There are still no concrete proposals for resolving these problems. In response to these problems, Tamil groups struggled peacefully. At that time, there was no demand for a separate state, only for equality, sharing of power, within one country. They were brutally repressed by the Sinhalese dominated governments, and pleas for equal treatment was never taken seriously. The Tamil struggle

evolved into an armed struggle, demanding a separate state.

The test of a real democratic government, I believe, is not how they treat their allies and the majority community – but how they treat minority communities and those with dissenting views. Sadly, the Sri Lankan government has failed miserably in this regard.

Most members of the majority Sinhalese community, including my relatives, good friends, classmates and even some members of the human rights community supports the war. Some think that disappearances, killing, injuries, displacement and detention of civilians are “collateral damages” that is acceptable. And many believe that to highlight these sufferings of civilians, is equal to being supporting terrorism. Many don’t agree that Tamil people have legitimate grievances, of discrimination and harassment even till today.

Such views are also shared by many Buddhist Monks and Christian clergy. Last Christmas day, the church I went to, prayed for a military victory for the government. There were no prayers or remembering those displaced, killed, injured, and disappeared and their family members. That was not an isolated incident.

In this context, I have been inspired to have been able to work with people who have come forward courageously to help affected people and speak out on their fate. Amongst them are few Bishops, Priests, Religious men and women, lay people, people without any faith. Several church leaders have opted to remain amongst the trapped civilian population in the Vanni region, in northern Sri Lanka, being subjected to merciless shelling and bombing. As a Sinhalese from Colombo, together with some other likeminded lay people, priests and religious, most of who are from the South and from the majority Sinhalese community, we started a group called Christian Solidarity Movement. We went to visit the war zones, met affected people. We shared about the suffering caused by war on civilians, prepared appeals and reports, wrote articles, gave interviews, prepared exhibitions, organized musical shows, and started a blog. We organized public prayer services, gave testimonies in churches and also collected financial assistance for displaced people inside churches and on the streets.

We also talked to diplomats, people in UN, and others we thought could help change the situation. In distant villages and towns, in the streets in Colombo, in the corridors of power in big cities like Geneva, New York, Washington. Here today, as well, I appeal to you to help the struggle for justice and peace in Sri Lanka.

We were threatened by a Deputy Minister and primetime news on state TV was used to brand us as terrorist supporters. The organization I work with, Law & Society Trust, and many other human rights and peace groups, have been similarly targeted for the reports we put out, abuses we exposed, campaigns we run.

This award today, encourages me to continue, and I hope it will also strengthen others with whom I’m engaged in this struggle. I remember with appreciation those who have worked with me, supported me, encouraged me and also sometimes helped to restrain myself and step back a bit. Many names, but in a special way, I remember my dear friend and colleague Dulani who was behind, in front and middle of many of my initiatives and efforts.

I’m thankful to the Bishop Tji Hak Soon Foundation for making this award to me, in this very critical time for us. The money I receive as part of the award will be used in full to support human rights defenders in Sri Lanka, who need assistance and protection.

I end with an earnest appeal. Please don’t stop with this award and by your presence here today. Please mobilize Korean people, Christians, church leaders, government leaders, other influential persons and groups, to support Sri Lankan people, and human rights defenders, as we fight for our rights, our dignity, our lives.

Thank you