

Conference Review

Feb 22, 2012

Conference on International Protection of Human Rights in the 21st Century - Case Study on Sri Lanka organized by Center for War Victims and Human Rights was held on Feb 21, 2012 at Pearson Conference Center, Toronto, Canada. Bracing the cold weather academics, lawyers, activists, MPs, and the public filled the conference center to capacity. The conference began with the speech from CWVHR president Anton Philip who outlined the history and development of human rights instruments such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations Convention Against Torture and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The panel speaker Ms. Deridre McConnell from Tamil Centre for Human Rights (London, UK) explained the historical, political and social conditions that resulted in the genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka. She showed that the conditions Tamil face in Sri Lanka is worse than apartheid in South Africa.

Danilo Reyes program officer from Asian Human Rights Commission (Hong Kong) spoke on the topic of "Accountability in constitutionally entrenched impunity". He explored whether it is possible to find accountability in a country where violations find impunity from the constitution. He urged that this has to be combated and addressed if we are to make any progress with respect to accountability in Sri Lanka.

Rev Dr. S J Emmanuel from Global Tamil Forum (London, UK) provided an activist point of view of the Tamils struggle in Sri Lanka.

David Matas, a human rights lawyer based in Winnipeg, Canada discussed the Tamil refugee situation in Canada, Malaysia, and Indonesia. He noted that considering the tightening of

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Canadian refugee laws Tamils should take advantage of group sponsorship in sponsoring refugees. He said there are 3000-4000 Tamil

refugees in Malaysia who face an uncertain future.

Even though there were more than 500 Tamil schools in Malaysia refugee children could not go to school.

In Indonesia there are about several hundred Tamil refugees.

While Indonesia is a poorer nation refugees there have a better chance of staying there.

Professor R. Sri Ranjan (University of Manitoba, Canada) reached out to the youngsters to educate themselves and educate others about human rights and the plight of Eelam Tamils. He took several articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and showed how they have been clearly violated in Sri Lanka.

He urged that youth in various diaspora communities as a vital resource can they can do much more to bring the plight of the Eelam Tamils to the attention of the International community.

Professor Theodore Orlin (Utica University, New York, USA) discussed on the topic of "The Uncertain Path to the Realization of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P); Its relevancy for the advocacy of Tamil dignity and rights". John Argue co-ordinator for Sri Lanka - Amnesty International Canada pointed out the various efforts Amnesty has and is undertaking to bring the Sri Lankan human rights issue to the forefront.

Final speaker Ali Beydoun Clinic's director and supervisor for the UNROW Human Rights Impact Litigation Clinic provided a clear three part strategy for action in persecuting war criminals from Sri Lanka. First strategy is to use domestic laws to access the judiciary as he has done in persecuting the Sri Lankan general in USA. Second strategy is to use universal jurisdiction laws in foreign courts.

These laws exist in UK, France and Canada and can be used against war criminals visiting or living in those countries.

The third strategy was using the UN mechanisms for justice and accountability.

To the last strategy he stressed the importance of upcoming UN Human Rights Council meeting in March and the Universal Periodic Review in Nov 2012.

He urged organizations and individuals to submit report to the UN body before the mid-March deadline for the Nov 2012 Review.

He also urged activists to effectively utilize the UN Special Reporter Office.

His comprehensive and action oriented talk on "Answering the Call for Justice: Accessing Tribunals and Seeking Accountability for War Crimes" provided the percipients clear framework and contacts to pursue concrete actions.

In addition to the expert speakers two MPs from the ruling Canadian conservative government, the Tamil MP from the NDP opposition party, and two MPs from the Liberal party of Canada

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offered their support for the conference. The conservative MPs stressed that they will raise Tamil issue in parliament and in the international forums.

Liberal MP stressed the need to form alliances outside Tamil community and work together with other communities.

Following the major presentations a panel discussion and questions sessions was held. The conference concluded with a Conference Declaration.