

## Statement on Reconciliation by Muslim Civil Society Individuals

February 17<sup>TH</sup> 2012

Sri Lanka today faces a range of challenges in ensuring a return to normality and a lasting peace, following the end of the twenty-five year-old war. Significant progress has been made on a number of fronts, including the partial return of displaced persons, the provision of basic rehabilitation assistance for war-affected communities, the progressive restoration and upgrading of essential services, the holding of elections and the implementation of macro-development projects. However, on the ground specific problems that hamper the transition from war to a sustainable and meaningful peace are left unaddressed. In particular, the challenge of reconciliation remains. Our failure to act now will result in all communities losing a historic opportunity to address the conflict and its impact.

**We, the undersigned, call for immediate action by Muslim politicians and civil society representatives to take collective responsibility and to devise mutually agreed upon ways and processes for moving forward. We also urge politicians and civil society groups of all ethnicities to acknowledge the suffering of their ethnic others and to develop processes of engagement towards reconciliation.**

The war witnessed the targeting of civilians, widespread violence and chauvinistic politics, fear and suspicion among communities. This resulted in severely straining and even destroying pre-war patterns of co-existence and social and economic mutual dependency, and led to the ghettoisation and polarisation of ethnic communities in war-affected areas. While the state, Tamil militants and politicians from all groups bear primary responsibility for the violence and its multiple impacts, the role played by religious leaders, community leaders, academics, journalists, lawyers, social workers and others either through their actions or through their silence also contributed to this situation.

In post-war Sri Lanka, there have been few initiatives that address the fundamental issues relating to reconciliation. As a result other key processes - such as on-going return and reconstruction efforts - could be undermined. The return of the displaced to the North and East is increasingly difficult for communities who are a minority in a particular area as the 'host' community views them as outsiders attempting to grab resources and land. Government and civil society actors often prove unsympathetic, and unsupportive. Development projects in the North and East continue to be designed so as to benefit largely one ethnic community, leaving other communities marginalised, which may force them to construct a similar project. These constitute an unequal and sometimes wasteful distribution of resources that end up reinforcing the segregation of ethnic communities. Ethnic favouritism of one or another community in development practiced during the war continues to be carried out not just by the State but also by international and national humanitarian organisations and by Muslim politicians, thereby reinforcing ethnic prejudices.

The recent statement by 71 Tamil civil society representatives titled '**An Appeal to the Tamil Community and its Civil and Political Representatives**' in response to the expulsion of Northern Muslims in October 1990 is a welcome gesture in the process of reconciliation. This attempt to confront

the past, acknowledge collective responsibility and to forge a new path towards reconciliation could prove to be one of the most significant efforts at promoting Tamil-Muslim coexistence over the last two decades. It builds on the efforts by individual Tamils in the past to recognise and acknowledge the heinous act that was the expulsion. The statement not only condemns the expulsion and vows 'never again' but also points to the long shadow the expulsion has cast on the Northern Muslim community. It also highlights the responsibility of Tamil civilians to address this community's current situation and will hopefully encourage a broader discussion within the Tamil Community. The statement also calls for a wider process of dialogue to address the problems of power sharing, equal rights for all citizens and reconciliation; a call which we endorse. Addressing issues of Tamil-Muslim coexistence is a must, for which both communities need to take responsibility.

While welcoming this initiative by Tamil civil society representatives, we as Muslim civil society activists feel that it is also incumbent on us to engage in a process of self-examination. The Muslim community struggled to secure recognition for the problems it faced during the war. The expulsion, massacres of Muslim in the East and elsewhere, mass displacement, loss of lands, human rights violations, and exclusion from peace talks are some of the issues that Muslims have had great difficulty in having the larger Sri Lankan community as well as policy makers acknowledge. However, just as we struggled to articulate our own concerns, we also have not been able to fully express empathy with and reach out to other communities who were victimised. In some cases we were even silent on issues faced by sections of the Muslim community, due to our sense of self-preservation, fear of challenging the government and the LTTE, and sometimes due to prejudice based on region, class or gender.<sup>1</sup> We also failed to articulate our empathy with the multiple victims of the conflict, including the victims of ethnic riots prior to the outbreak of war and those killed, missing, maimed and displaced during the bloody years of the war. While all the ethnic communities suffered during the war, the Tamil community in the North and East in particular were subjected to brutal levels of violence and it is paramount that we recognise and acknowledge this.

We welcome the breadth of issues and recommendations covered in the government-appointed **Lessons Learnt Reconciliation Commission** (LLRC) report, including the recognition of some problems faced by the Muslim community. We believe that the LLRC report provides some positive recommendations for consolidating peace and democracy in Sri Lanka. The report highlights the need for action on a variety of issues ranging from facilitating the return of the displaced, problems of land ownership, demilitarisation; investigations into disappearances and other human rights violations, improving the implementation of the language policy and a government-led reconciliation process. We do note, however, significant gaps especially with regard to power sharing and addressing accountability issues. While acknowledging these gaps and calling on the Government to address them, we urge the Government to implement the LLRC's recommendations, which have far-reaching implications for national-level reconciliation, peace and democracy. Developing a mechanism to monitor the

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that Muslim civil society groups and individuals were involved in multiple humanitarian initiatives such as providing cooked food for Tamils displaced from the Vanni in April-May 2009 or from Western Batticaloa in 2007 and relief for tsunami victims of all communities and joined in other collective initiatives to condemn particular incidents and to call for redress.

implementation - that is answerable to Parliament - would be a useful step in this regard. As the LLRC report points out the principal actor capable of implementing reconciliation initiatives and of facilitating an environment for reconciliation is the Government. This does not rule out or minimise the critical role that needs to be played by other actors.

For the Muslim community, it is essential that our politicians move beyond their usual response of complaining about exclusion including of Muslim representation in political negotiations. We need to devise a consensus on how we want the variety of post-war issues to be addressed, including IDPs and resettlement, land, the political solution and co-existence. While this would strengthen our own position, it would also throw into relief the commonality of issues, and the need for consensus-building with other communities, including Tamils, Sinhalese and Up-Country Tamils. Given the failure of our political leaders to do so, we as civil society activists need to recognise that we have a responsibility to take on this challenge of developing a consensus and to demand that our political representatives take action. Our failure to do so could result in feeding exclusive communal politics, discriminatory social practices and worst of all in sustaining the conflict. We could then lose this historic opportunity to address our differences and to build a Sri Lanka based on principles of pluralism, democracy and justice.

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