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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Sri Lanka

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Bishop, Julie, MP

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Ms JULIE BISHOP (Curtin) (4.09 pm)—In rising to respond to the ministerial statement on Sri Lanka I acknowledge the further assistance to Sri Lanka announced today by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. It is important that our aid effort be focused on our region and that it be targeted and delivered in the most cost-effective way to ensure value for money for the benefit of the aid recipients and the Australian taxpayer.

Sri Lanka is emerging from arguably the darkest chapter in its history since independence in 1948. The people of Sri Lanka have suffered terribly through a civil war in the decades since 1976, culminating in the final confrontation that led to the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in May last year. The events which followed that military defeat raised international concerns as hundreds of thousands of Tamil people were held in camps. A decision to prevent access to the camps for humanitarian workers from NGOs raised further concerns in the international community. The situation in Sri Lanka was further complicated by allegations of war crimes and the decision of Sri Lanka's top military officer, General Sarath Fonseka, to resign from the military late last year and contest the January presidential election against the incumbent president. General Fonseka was unsuccessful at the election. He was arrested and is currently facing courts-martial for alleged violations of military law. The government has been accused of conducting a campaign of persecution against General Fonseka, raising further concerns about political freedom and democracy in Sri Lanka.

Without seeking to pass judgment on the government of Sri Lanka, it is my wish and the wish of most people around the world that Sri Lanka find a path to sustained peace and prosperity. Sri Lankans share the aspirations of most people in most nations, wanting their government to provide a safe and secure environment in which they can raise their families and live their lives in safety. Having won the war against the LTTE, it is important that the Sri Lankan government win the peace. It is vital that international standards for human rights be maintained as Sri Lanka continues its transition to a post-conflict society.

I note the European Union withdrew Sri Lanka's trade privileges last month due to concerns about what it described as 'significant shortcomings' on human rights issues. However, overnight a spokesperson has said that the European Union is committed to working with Sri Lanka to see whether the conditions for a reversal are in place. A high-level delegation from Sri Lanka visited Brussels this week, with further meetings scheduled which will hopefully prove to be a constructive exercise. It is also worth noting that the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, had proposed to establish an advisory council to investigate ways of holding accountable the alleged perpetrators of human rights violations during the final days of the battle against the LTTE. In recent days, a spokesperson for the Secretary-General has said that Ban Ki-moon is still discussing the idea of a panel of experts to investigate alleged war crimes and that 'it is unlikely such a panel will be established very soon'.

It has also been reported that the 118 nations of the Non-Aligned Movement wrote to the Secretary-General, expressing concern about such an investigation. There is a difficult balancing act for the international community in that anyone who has committed crimes against humanity or war crimes should be held to account for their actions. At the same time, there is a need to ensure that actions by the international community do not cause further internal turmoil within Sri Lanka and do nothing to undermine efforts to develop a sustainable peace on the island. It is vital that the seeds for long-lasting peace be sown from the current situation and that it does not sow the seeds for a return to violence. There can only be a political solution to the tensions in Sri Lanka—a negotiated solution that accommodates the reasonable concerns of all parties.

One positive development is the recent report from the Tamil National Alliance, which was regarded as the political wing of the LTTE, calling for a new federal structure that provides Tamils with a level of independence under the umbrella of the Sri Lankan national government. This is a major step forward, as the TNA had previously supported the establishment of a separate Tamil homeland. A report has said that the TNA wants a negotiated solution and its leader has effectively renounced violence as a means of achieving its goals. The Sri Lankan government has assured the international community that it is working on a political solution and that time is needed to obtain a consensus. The President of Sri Lanka, in his speech declaring victory over the LTTE, spoke of the need to end ethnic and religious conflict and promised a home-grown solution to this conflict. The

coalition in Australia welcomes recent reports that 185,000 people have just been released from the camps and allowed to return to their homes. While this is a positive development, it is vital that the process of release and resettlement be completed as quickly as possible.

The sooner that people are able to return to their homes and start to rebuild their lives, the sooner that steps can be taken to rebuild trust and respect between all communities in Sri Lanka. That process has begun, according to respected analyst Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, who wrote in a recent report of Future Directions International:

The defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam in May 2009 has given vital democratic space for previously suppressed and sidelined Tamil political parties to meaningfully engage in the democratic process. As such, the political landscape for Tamils has changed dramatically over the last six months in particular, which has seen a new energy and optimism emerge among Tamil leaders in Sri Lanka eager to make headway in restoring normality and rebuilding their society.

Mr DeSilva-Ranasinghe went on to say:

Although the Sri Lankan government remained overly cautious after the defeat of the LTTE, it steadily relaxed its security posture, which was first demonstrated in May 2009, when it launched a major recruitment drive to recruit 2,000 Tamil speaking police constables in the Eastern Province.

He wrote that the previous atmosphere of tension had dissipated and had been replaced by a vitality and energy that brought great hope for a longer lasting peace. While it is not possible to form an independent view of the situation on the ground without visiting the region, these reports are greatly encouraging. If accurate, there appears to be much greater hope that future tensions between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka will be solved at the ballot box and not through the use of violence.

I also note that in the minister's statement to this House he said that the situation on the ground in Sri Lanka had changed irrevocably since the military defeat of the LTTE. That is welcome news, as it would indicate that there will be a lessening of pressure on Australia's borders through the people-smuggling trade in people from Sri Lanka. Given that the government has consistently claimed that push factors are driving the surge in boat people to Australia through the people-smuggling trade, I would hope that there will be an assurance from the government that the number of asylum seekers will drop.

Australians are rightly concerned that the almost daily arrival of boats, many from Sri Lanka, continues the massive surge in unauthorised arrivals under Labor which will end up costing Australians more than \$1 billion. The Rudd government has already admitted to a \$132 million blow-out in the cost of processing boat arrivals on Christmas Island this financial year plus another \$34 million to increase the number of beds on Christmas Island because the government had predicted only 200 people would arrive illegally by boat this financial year, a massive underestimation which ignored the pull factor of the government's weakening of our border protection laws. So far this financial year, over 3,000 people have arrived by boat and, even on a conservative estimate, by the end of July the Rudd government will be forced to spend an extra \$230 million to deal with the sustained surge in arrivals under its failed policies.

As the shadow minister for immigration and citizenship pointed out recently, the Rudd government is currently planning on spending only \$130 million per year over the next three years. Based on this year's expected cost blow-outs, it will have to upgrade these estimates by an extra \$300 million each year. Over four years, including 2009-10, this will leave Australians with an additional bill of over \$1 billion in immigration costs alone because of the government's failed immigration policies and the weakening of the coalition's strong border protection regime. So we anticipate that at some point the government will reflect the views of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and revisit its estimates of likely boat arrivals, including from Sri Lanka, given the changing political environment there.

I have spoken previously in this House on the efforts of the member for Canning who, as chair for a number of years and now Deputy Chair of the Australia-Sri Lanka Parliamentary Friendship Group, has played a major role in building greater understanding between our two nations. The member for Canning has long recognised that personal relationships between Australians and Sri Lankans underpin strong diplomatic, cultural and economic relations. Australia, as a friend of Sri Lanka, will continue to support efforts at building peace and greater prosperity.