

Sri Lanka: STATEMENT ON BLACK JULY 1983 by Int'l Center for Prevention & Prosecution of Genocide

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This week marks the 32nd Anniversary of the incident referred to as Black July 1983. On 24th July 1983, riots by Sinhalese mobs began in Colombo. It led to the death of over 3000 Tamils. The riots spread throughout the island and lasted over several days.

Several Tamils were burnt alive. Several thousands of Tamils were rendered homeless as a result of their homes being set ablaze. 52 Tamil prisoners were massacred inside the main prison at Welikade. Tamil businesses were burnt to the ground. Several Tamils left the country as refugees.

The riots took place with government complicity. The rioters had the addresses of Tamil homes supplied to them by state officials. The police looked the other side. Many photographs show the rioting with hapless Tamils awaiting the fatal blows and triumphant Sinhalese standing around them. The Police simply stood by.

There have been no prosecutions brought against any of the participants in the riots, though there are pictorial and eyewitness accounts of the killings that took place. The Government of Sri Lanka failed in its duty of protecting the lives of the Tamils and thereafter, of deterring future riots by punishing the miscreants.

The then President of Sri Lanka, Junius Jayawardene, in a statement to the press, said: "I am not worried about the opinion of the Tamil people ... now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinions ... the more you put pressure on the North, the happier the Sinhalese people will be here ... Really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhalese people will be happy".

The International Centre on the Prosecution and Prevention of Genocide believes that the Black July riots were part of the genocidal policies that successive governments had initiated from the time of the independence of Sri Lanka in 1948 against the Tamil people.

These events began with the Gal Oya riots of 1956. There were successive riots against the Tamil people (The major incidents were the riots in 1958 and 1977, the burning of the Jaffna Library in 1982 the Black July riots 1983, the killing of several Tamil civilians at Mullivaikal, estimated by the United Nations to be over 40,000, by others to be over 100,000). Many Tamils simply disappeared and remain unaccounted for. This chain of events, for which no one is yet to be prosecuted or punished, evidence a genocidal intent on the part of the successive Sinhalese governments of Sri Lanka.

The Centre urges that, in respect of the Mullivaikal killings of Tamil civilians, the perpetrators are held accountable by an international tribunal. Two United Nations reports, the Darusman Report and the Petrie Report have found the killings to be in gross violations of international criminal law. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is to make a report on accountability for these killings.

The Centre urges that the UNHCR insists on trials of the perpetrators by an international tribunal and not by a hybrid tribunal with Sri Lankan judges sitting on it. The Tamils cannot get justice from such a hybrid tribunal when successive killings of Tamils have gone unprosecuted for sixty years.

It would be an eyewash and an impediment to the progress of international criminal law if a hybrid tribunal were to hear these obvious violations of the law. The restoration of the rule of law in Sri Lanka as well as the course of establishing accountability mechanisms for genocide in other situations would be setback if an international tribunal is not established to try the alleged offenders.

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