



**For immediate release**

March 20, 2010

**USTPAC appeals to UNHCR not to relax protection guidelines for asylum seekers from Sri Lanka**

United States Tamil Political Action Council (USTPAC) is alarmed by reports of the premier agency in the world for protecting refugees, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, contemplating relaxing protection guidelines for asylum seekers from Sri Lanka. "Thousands of ethnic Tamils who left dire and oppressive conditions in Sri Lanka and are now temporarily hosted in many countries could face torture and possible death if they were to be deported to Sri Lanka," warned a USTPAC spokesperson.

USTPAC urges UNHCR to effect steps and policies to help protect both the Tamils as an entire ethnic group, and those Sinhalese who are opposed to the policies of the current Government of Sri Lanka. This request is based on first-hand reports about the situation faced by the Tamils in Sri Lanka. At a minimum, we urge UNHCR to conduct an in-depth review of the current situation faced by the Tamils and many Sinhalese civilians prior to UNHCR revising the status of asylum seekers from the island upon which many governments base their return policies.

In addition, we kindly request that UNHCR make available any information in their possession determining that Sri Lanka is safe for Tamils and for Sinhalese dissidents.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay have both voiced concern about the situation in Sri Lanka. On March 9, 2010 Mr. Ban said his intention is to establish an expert panel to advise him on "setting the broad parameters and standards on the way ahead on establishing accountability" in Sri Lanka. This accountability concerns possible breaches of international humanitarian law and other abuses of human rights during the latter stages of the conflict in the island. The human rights situation has not stabilized since the end of the war and the island remains a dangerous place for almost all Tamils and many Sinhalese.

The US Department of State's 2009 Annual Human Rights Report provided a grim scenario for the Tamils in Sri Lanka stating, "***Outside of the conflict zone, the overwhelming majority of victims of human rights violations, such as extrajudicial killings and disappearances, were young male Tamils, while Tamils were estimated to be only 16 percent of the overall population... Credible reports cited unlawful killings by paramilitaries and others believed to be working with the awareness and assistance of the government, assassinations by unknown perpetrators, politically motivated killings, and disappearances. The government was credibly accused of arbitrary arrests and detentions, poor prison conditions, denial of fair public trial, government corruption and lack of transparency, infringement of freedom of movement, harassment of journalists and lawyers critical of the government, and discrimination against minorities.***"

"It is too early to revise the status of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka," according to the USTPAC spokesman. "Tamils, especially young Tamil males and females, remain at risk in Sri Lanka from killing and disappearances, torture, rape, arbitrary arrest and detention without trial for long periods. USTPAC urges UNHCR to conduct a thorough assessment and engage in consultations with Tamils and others across the island and in the Diaspora prior to making a decision that could result in serious implications for the lives of those seeking asylum in other countries.

For more information, please contact USTPAC at [info@ustpac.org](mailto:info@ustpac.org) or 202-595-3123.