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## **Human Rights Concerns in Sri Lanka**

### **Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations**

*Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), Chairman  
Excerpts of Opening Remarks  
June 20, 2018*

The Sri Lankan civil war ended almost 10 years ago this May. The 25-year war cost an estimated 100,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands more. The civil war was a brutal ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils; both sides—the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and the rebel “Tamil Tigers”—have been credibly accused of unimaginable war crimes.

To this day, justice for many of the victims remains elusive. Although many observers hoped that the reformist government of President Sirisena would increase access to justice, focus on human rights, emphasize transparency and accountability, and improve the rule of law, his administration has been criticized for having an inadequate response. Despite having run on a platform of ethnic reconciliation, President Sirisena has done little to mend the ties between the groups, and the political polarization has increased among both ethnic groups.

As one of our experts today, J.S. Tissainayagam, will attest, there has been no progress on holding those responsible for war crimes to account. As he will describe, forced disappearances of Tamils and torture were endemic during the war. Much of this was facilitated by the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, or the PTA. The PTA has yet to be repealed, and is still in use by the government and security forces. Whereas

most Tamils nowadays simply desire some semblance of self-governance and federalism, their areas in the north and eastern part of the island are increasingly militarized.

A concerning development in Sri Lanka is the resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. As one of our expert witnesses today, Dr. Michael Jerryson, will describe, this particularly virulent strand of nationalism preaches exclusion of other ethnic and religious minorities, with Buddhist fundamentalists in groups such as the BBS saying “This is not a multi-religious country. This is a Sinhalese country.”

What of the minority groups, such as the predominantly Hindu Tamils, then? Or the Muslims, who constitute a distinct minority, or the Christians, who can be either be Sinhalese or Tamil? If the character of Sri Lanka is solely Buddhist and Sinhala, there is little room for these ethnic and religious minorities to thrive, and reconciliation will remain a far off goal.

Unfortunately, the trend is heading in the opposite direction—in local elections in February of this year, a newly formed Buddhist nationalist party gained 45 percent of the vote, beating the government coalition combined. Furthermore, in March of this year, Sinhalese mobs engaged in an anti-Muslim pogrom after a local dispute, forcing the President to declare a state of emergency.

Sri Lanka’s stability is of critical importance to the United States national interests. Strategically located in the sea-lanes linking the Persian Gulf to East Asia, this island-nation has seen a spike in recent activity by the Chinese. China’s strategy globally is one of indebting countries and binding them in servitude so it can extract resources, so it is safe to say that Beijing’s initiatives will not emphasize ethnic reconciliation and/or human rights. This presents the United States with an opportunity to stand up for justice and the rule of law and to oppose China’s malign influence.

After a brutal war that costed an unconscionable loss of life, we must do better to help Sri Lanka get on the right page again. The country has promise and the people deserve better. Once all sides recognize this, this island-nation will finally have some semblance of peace.