

“Human Rights Concerns in Sri Lanka”

December 8, 2021

Rep. Chris Smith

Welcome to our witnesses who will address human rights and accountability—or the serious lack of both—in Sri Lanka.

Back in June of 2018, I chaired a hearing of my Global Human Rights Subcommittee on “[Human Rights Concerns in Sri Lanka.](#)”

Our witnesses then looked at the state of accountability in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan civil war that ended in 2009. Sadly, as today’s hearing will reveal, accountability concerns remain.

That quarter-century long war was absolutely brutal, with an estimated cost in blood of 100,000 lives and the displacement of hundreds of thousands more.

It was also largely fought along ethnic lines between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils. Both sides—the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and the rebel “Tamil Tigers”—were credibly accused of unimaginable war crimes.

There were also religious dimensions as well, between largely Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils, though Christians are represented among both ethnic groups, as Christianity is said to date back to the time of St. Thomas the Apostle who evangelized India and Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is a religiously diverse country, also containing a Muslim community, though sadly, religious tensions often add to and compound the ethnic ones.

Nowhere was this more tragically seen than in the Easter 2019 bombings of Christian churches by jihadist groups.

Religious differences also have political implications as well, as religious minorities have tended to support the current opposition, with the governing party linked with Buddhist nationalism.

All of this complicates the quest for justice and accountability. To this day, justice for many of the victims of war remains elusive.

I anticipate our witnesses will elaborate on the progress – or lack of progress – on holding those responsible for war crimes to account.

A report from January of this year by the UN Human Rights Council, unfortunately, warns of a “deepening” culture of impunity, while ethno-nationalism rises.

One of the concerns raised in our 2018 hearing, the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, or PTA, remains unaddressed. If anything, the scope of the PTA has been expanded by additional, troubling provisions promulgated in March of this year.

After a brutal war that cost an unconscionable loss of life, what can Congress do to better help Sri Lanka get on the right page again?

(Finally, in early January of 2005 immediately after the December 26th Indian Ocean Tsunami, I visited hard hit areas of Sri Lanka—along with Banda Aceh in Indonesia and Phuket, Thailand. The United States and much of the international community including Catholic Relief Services and other NGOs quickly responded with humanitarian aid. Despite their staggering loss, the people of Sri Lanka were committed to rebuilding. It was inspiring.)