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Written statement* submitted by Tourner la page, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[14 February 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Black July 1983: An act of Genocide from Sri Lankan government*

Thirty-five years ago, in late July 1983, Sri Lanka's Tamils were terrorised by angry mobs murdering, maiming and burning their homes in an orgy of violence unparalleled in the island's history. More than 3000 Tamils were killed within just 10 days, the 150,000 were rendered homeless and began a refugee flight that leaves more than 2 000,000 Tamils scattered all around the world today.

The events of July 1983 are poignant for the entire Tamil population around the world. Between July 24 and 29, Tamils were systematically targeted with violence in Colombo and many other parts of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan Governments officials categorized the violence as uncontrollable race riots instigated by the killing of 13 Sinhala soldiers on the night of July 23. However, history and the course of events during Black July illustrate the Sri Lankan Government's undeniable involvement in the genocidal acts against Tamils.

The deliberate, pre-planned and state-sanctioned violence devastated the Tamil people across the island, sparking a mass displacement that persists today. Black July is commonly cited as catalyzing the outbreak of war in Sri Lanka between various Tamil liberation movements and the government of Sri Lanka.

For one week beginning on the night of July 24, 1983, Sinhalese mobs attacked Tamil civilians, homes, and businesses in a campaign characterized by raping, killing, burning, and looting. The government facilitated the violence by providing voter registration lists identifying Tamils by ethnicity and incited the Sinhalese population to persecute their Tamil neighbors. The economic cost of the riots to the Tamil community was \$300 million, but the cost to the mental state of those Tamils who survived the pogrom is immeasurable.

The complicity of the government of Sri Lanka in these pogroms is clear. During the first days of the violence, local police officers and military stood by, at best doing nothing and at worst even joining the rioters. The Prime Minister at the time, J. R. Jayewardene, expressed the state's disinterest in acting on behalf of the Tamils two weeks before the riots: "I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna (Tamil) people now. Now we cannot think of them. Not about their lives or of their opinion about us. The more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhala people will be here... really, if I starve the Tamils, Sinhala people will be happy."

Particularly gruesome events included:

At 1 o'clock in the morning of July 24, the army rounded up hundreds of Tamils in Trincomalee, Mannar, and Vavuniya in the Northeast who had fled the anti-Tamil riots of 1977 and 1981. These Tamils were forcibly taken and left without possessions in the central hills.

Before the riots broke out in Colombo, the army in Jaffna went on rampage killing 51 innocent Tamil civilians. In Trincomalee, similar violence broke out as members of the Navy randomly shot at civilians and burnt down Tamil property.

In the evening in Colombo, the state funeral was being organized for the soldiers. Thousands of people arrived at the cemetery but the bodies failed to appear. After waiting several hours, much of the crowd objecting the burial in Kanatte and demanded the bodies to be returned to the next of kin. As the large crowd began to leave the grave, a new group of people (identified as government gangs) entered the Borella junction and raised anti-Tamil cries. As the anti-government cry subsided and anti-Tamil cries became dominant, arson and murdering of Tamils broke out.

After the midnight lull, mobs were led by people with voter registration lists in hand torched Tamil homes, looted and destroyed Tamil businesses. All traffic was searched, and any Tamils found were killed, maimed, or burned alive. Cyril Matthew, Minister of Industries, was witnessed directly pinpointing shops to be burned down.

In Welikade prison, 35 Tamil political prisoners who were awaiting trial under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, were massacred by Sinhalese prisoners with the complicity of jail guards using spikes, clubs and iron rods.

The violence spread rapidly throughout the country, engulfing towns like Gampaha, Kalutara, Kandy, Matale, Nuwara Eliya and Trincomalee. One town was completely wiped out – the Indian Tamil town of Kandapola, near Nuwara Eliya.

Government imposed a strict censorship of media reporting on the anti-Tamil violence. Word spread of Sri Lanka's state of disorder as eye witness accounts and photographs taken by returning tourists illustrated the scale of violence.

17 more prisoners at Welikade Prison were hacked to death just two days after the prison massacre. The surviving 36 prisoners are transferred to other prisons.

President J.R. Jayewardene addressed the nation for the first time since the anti-Tamil pogroms, only to fan the flames of anti-Tamil sentiments by stating that anyone who advocated for separatism would lose all their "civic rights".

Tamils in Colombo began evacuating by cargo ship to the Northern city of Jaffna. Hundreds more internally displaced persons waited anxiously for the next cargo ship to transport them to Jaffna. Tamils fearing persecution, flee their homeland for Western countries.

* The harrowing mass murder witnessed by a Norwegian tourist, Eli Skarstein, and her 15-year-old daughter Kristen. They watched helplessly as a mini-bus full of Tamils was set on fire by a Sinhalese mob. The doors were locked by the mob before setting the bus alight. More than 100 spectators watched as 20 Tamils were burned to death.

Paul Seighart, chairperson of the British section of the International Commission of Jurists, who was sent to Sri Lanka by the ICJ on a fact-finding mission, wrote that the anti-Tamil violence of July 1983 was "a series of deliberate acts, executed in accordance with a concerted plan, conceived and organised well in advance". *The Review*, an ICJ publication, declared that the violence "amounted to acts of genocide".

Sri Lankan industries minister Cyril Matthew was the mastermind behind the violence, arming the marauding mobs with electoral lists identifying Tamil households, and providing transport in government vehicles. Two years earlier the same minister was responsible for burning down the Jaffna Public Library, which held more than 95,000 books and manuscripts. The minister proved the German poet Heinrich Heine's prediction that people who burn books will end up burning people.

Anti-Tamil violence became a common feature in the island's post-colonial political landscape. Between 1958 and 1983, there were seven pogroms, each more violent than the preceding one, designed to beat the Tamils into submission by killing, maiming, burning and destroying their property. In July 1983, Tamils were beaten, hacked and burned to death in a frenzy of racial hatred. Tamils were faced with a stark choice of fleeing or fighting. While thousands fled, others stayed on to fight.

Anti-Tamil pogroms have not occurred since July 1983. Instead, the Sri Lankan government has waged war on the Tamil people, whose quest for independence was boosted in 1983. However there are ominous signs that such a pogrom may well be in the offing.

State-orchestrated and army-aided mob violence unleashed against the Tamils of Trincomalee in April 2006 was reminiscent of the way in which the events unfolded in July 1983. Entire Tamil families have been massacred by the Sri Lankan army, as was the case just prior to Black July.

Open threats have been made by members of the National Sinhala Rights Party, which is part of the Sri Lankan ruling coalition, of "dire consequences" for Tamils living in the Sinhala South.

Tamils have endured persecution and oppression far too long. It is time for them to be free and to be masters of their own destiny.

Years after the end of the civil war in May 2009, anti-Tamil mobs still claim the lives of innocent Tamil civilians. Tamil areas continue to be militarized, and notorious “white van” abductions and torture still occur under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

For Sri Lanka to make post-war progress, it is essential for the government to acknowledge, cease, and provide remedies and reparations for the ongoing atrocities against Tamils—atrocities that have escalated since Black July in 1983. Instead of proactively taking steps to end decades of impunity for anti-Tamil attacks, the government of Sri Lanka opposes certain necessary reconciliation and justice measures for Tamil victims, such as involving international judges in prosecutions.

We urges the international community to act and hold accountable perpetrators of international crimes, including former and current high-level government officials. International actors must be integrally involved in the investigation and prosecution of wartime atrocities; Sri Lanka’s call for a domestic-only mechanism is unacceptable and will not satisfy victims’ needs and desires.

The best way for the international community to honor the lives lost during and since Black July is by listening to Tamils and ensuring effective and credible accountability processes. After thirty-five years of war-related suffering, Tamils’ cries for justice must be heard.

*Collectif La Paix au Sri Lanka, Swiss Council of Eelam Tamil (SCET), NGOs without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.