

Written by -Rowena Mason ,The Guardian, Friday 15 November 2013-
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- *David Cameron meets Tamil refugees in the Sabapathy Pillai refugee camp in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA* -



The refugees of Sabapathy Pillai believed David Cameron had been sent by God to help them get their land back. A swarm of Jaffna women stormed through a line of military police to plead for his help in finding their missing loved ones. Yet only a few hours later, the prime minister left a meeting with Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa no closer to securing an investigation into alleged war crimes, or an admission that many Tamils continue to be persecuted. The prime minister arrived at the Commonwealth summit in Colombo on Thursday night, promising to use his trip to highlight human rights abuses in the host country, following fierce criticism of his decision to attend. But as world leaders and royalty, including the Prince of Wales, gathered in the capital for their biennial meeting, Cameron first headed to meet victims of Sri Lanka's 25-year civil war and those suffering continuing violence. An extraordinary 12 hours followed, as the prime minister became the first world leader to travel to the Tamil-dominated north since independence in 1948, before returning to the capital for a planned showdown with Rajapaksa.

According to the UN, as many as 40,000 civilians are estimated to have died in the final months of the regime's conflict with Tamil Tiger separatists. In the four years since then, the Sri Lankan government stands accused of allowing kidnappings, torture and intimidation, leading Canada and India to boycott the summit in protest.

Despite fears within Downing Street that Sri Lanka would find a reason to prevent his trip to the north, a red carpet was rolled out for Cameron as his private plane, operated by a commercial arm of the military, arrived in Jaffna.

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The official welcome was shortlived, however, amid a heavy army presence and pro-government protesters bearing placards calling for an inquiry into Britain's colonial crimes.

His first stop was a meeting with CV Vigneswaran, the new Tamil first minister of the northern province, at Jaffna's symbolic library, which was torn down and rebuilt after the civil war.

As he left the building, his car was surrounded by hundreds of Tamil protesters, held back by the military, as they tried to hand him pictures of their missing loved ones. Several were thrown to the ground as they broke through a security cordon to reach him.

The prime minister then travelled to the offices of the newspaper Uthayan, to meet journalists who blame the deaths of six of their colleagues on masked paramilitary gangs sent by the government. One is still missing.

The paper's editor has lived in his office for seven years after attempts on his life, and there have been six attacks on his premises and staff this year.

Cameron toured a printing press destroyed by an arson attack which has left the office with bullet holes in the walls.

He saw the desk where a staff member was murdered in 2006, and was given a copy of a fake propaganda newspaper distributed during recent elections.

Anuraj Sivarajah, online editor of the newspaper, said he was very clear who was to blame for the attacks and arson that has brought the newspaper near financial ruin.

"Those responsible are the government," he said. "It's the paramilitary. The military is still ruling here. The Tamil chief minister has no powers, no land, no control of the police."

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He supported Cameron's visit, saying it had helped highlight intimidation of the media, and said the biggest issue for journalists was covert surveillance by the military, often in civilian clothes.

"It's a very big gift for us, his coming," he said. "There are two sides of it. After that they will be afraid to touch us.

"Or the other way around – they just will think, 'We'll show who we are.' Maybe tomorrow they will come."

The prime minister also visited the Sabapathy Pillai refugee camp, described by the government as a "welfare village", where around 150 families have lived in makeshift accommodation since they were displaced in 1990.

Members of the military police were present outside the newspaper and throughout the village, hovering in the background.

Inside the camp, residents were optimistic that Cameron's visit could improve their chances of returning to the fishing settlements they left behind 20 years ago, which have been turned into a military zone.

Suharsha Uthayaswriyan, deputy leader of the site, repeatedly said his people were not angry with the government, but they lived in "bad conditions" and "just want to go back to their lands".

"We do not want to live in a welfare centre, we want to live in our own lands," the 30-year-old said.

"For the past 23 years, people have come to see us but have not taken any action.

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"We believe in David Cameron as a god coming down to this part of the land so we believe he can make a difference. He is God and sent by God to us."

However, such high expectations are likely to be disappointed. Downing Street sources conceded that Cameron made little headway with Rajapaksa during an hour-long meeting on Friday evening.

They described the exchange as robust and animated, with Rajapaksa acknowledging problems in his country but arguing that they needed time to be sorted out.

During the encounter, Cameron quoted Winston Churchill, urging the president to show "in victory, magnanimity", and compared the path of reconciliation to the Northern Ireland peace process.

He brought up attacks on Christians and Muslims, the murder of British national Khuram Shaikh, the killing of journalists and seizure of land.

Cameron also mentioned a Channel 4 documentary about atrocities allegedly committed by state forces in the last months of the war, containing images verified by the UN.

However, the president batted away the allegations and suggested that Cameron was using the visit to win favour with the Tamil community in the UK.

Earlier, a Sri Lankan media minister had warned the prime minister he could not treat the country like a colony.

Following his visits, Cameron told television reporters he believed the visit had been worthwhile to highlight the plight of many people suffering in Jaffna.

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"The pictures of journalists, shot and killed, on the walls, and hearing stories of journalists who have disappeared long after the war has ended – that will stay with me," he said.

"And the image, in this camp, of talking to a young woman who came here when she was very young – a child in this camp – and wants nothing more than to go to her own home."

Cameron also argued that the Commonwealth had helped bring about elections in the provinces and suggested that he would raise concerns about the situation in Sri Lanka in international forums including the G20 and EU.

This could include pushing for an international investigation into human rights abuses, amid few signs the government will agree to hold an inquiry of its own that would satisfy observers as credible.

He added: "These issues aren't settled in one day or one visit."

Courtesy: <http://www.http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/15/david-cameron-visits-tamils-sri-lanka/world/2013/nov/15/david-cameron-visits-tamils-sri-lanka>

Sri Lanka plan to catch out Cameron! The island's rulers have devised a way to head off Britain's call for a war crimes investigation! By Nicola Smith in Colombo, Nicola Smith
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