**Thematic Discussion on Racial Discrimination in Today's World:**

**Racial profiling, ethnic cleansing and current global issues and challenges**

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Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important discussion. In order to contribute to this crucial conversation which is very relevant to current global challenges, I would like to share the experience of Sri Lanka largely within the context of a South Asian country as it struggled to deal with the creation of a New nation since independence in 1948. A historical struggle of the inability to constitute a nation state recognising pluralism and equality in power sharing. The minority-majority ethnic tensions finally resulted in a full scale war resulting in the adoption of the now very famous UN resolution 30/1. The conflict led to wide-scale extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, and other human rights violations. Minority Tamil population disproportionately suffered those conflict-related crimes while the Muslim community was forced to leave the Northern province by the LTTE in 1992. With the democratic change of the government in 2015, the country is now moving slowly towards truth, justice, accountability and reconciliation. While we are still struggling to overcome the past atrocities and achieve lasting-peace in the country, let me share a number of elements which led to the conflict and violence we experienced for over 30 years.

**Languages**

The conflict which was emerging among the political elite since independence worsened as the majority Sinhalese language was made the official language in 1956. This literally meant all official communications being disposed in Sinhala. A citizen who can not read or write Sinhala was made helpless and made to feel marginalised in relation to his/her own existence in the country. There are many personal stories well documents which resulted in the violation of human rights including opportunities for employment and education. Not only did this affect the Tamil speaking people. Even a large population from the Burgher community (Dutch and Portuguese origin) left the country, most of them now residing in Australia. Although Tamil became an official language in 1987, as a country we are still struggling to implement it effectively. This challenge continues to impact on our co-existence as communities as well as in the administration of justice.

**Religions**

Despite the country’s religious diversity, the current Constitution of Sri Lanka gives to Buddhism *“the foremost place”.* We experienced extreme right wing politicians in power and religious leaders using this particular clause promoting ethno-religious supremacy. The emergence of a strong state sponsored “Sinhalisation”, programme in the aftermath of the war in 2009 by the former regime was rooted in this mind-set. The rise of religious extremism particularly as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and RAVANA Force unleashing of violence against Christian and Buddhist places of worship in an unprecedented manner in the 2013-2014 era was clearly backed by the then State. Even today we are grappling with this challenge in the constitutional reform process.

**Hate speech and hate crimes**

The failure to build a modern nation continues to impinge on co-existence as the majoritarian political polity promotes and nurtures ethnic and religious divisions including spread of hate languge and intimidation that goes unpunished. The pogrom, in 1983 known as the Black July still haunts our minds as it unleashed violence against the Tamil speaking people promoting hate speech and hatred of the other. The pogrom gave rise to both internal displacement and increase of refugees from Sri Lanka. This clearly lead to the emergence of an armed conflict in Sri Lanka for 30 long years which ended in 2009. War did not end the conflict. We are now struggling to find the dead and the disappeared. War did not bring peace to our land. It silenced the guns. But fear of each other has not been dispelled. We are still fearful of each other and live in suspicion as communities. The recent clash in the southern province is a regretful example of this reality. A motor bicycle accident giving rise to a Sinhala – Muslim clash that resulted in burning houses and several being injured.

**Lessons learnt**

Racial and ethnic profiling has persisted and continued to pose a serious challenge to the realization of the rights of individuals. We saw the worst phase during the past 30 years as the Prevention of Terrorism Act used as a counter-terrorism measure disproportionately targeting the Tamil community. We are also aware that the institutionalised discrimination and impunity culture significantly contributed to the dark history of the country. Ethnic and religious conflicts in Sri Lanka has deep rooted causes like in any other country in South Asia. The class, caste, gender, religious and ethnic causes have been well studied and identified by activists and researchers. Yet we have failed to combat discrimination and racism, the fears experienced by the minorities. Further we in South Asia as well as all those who are committed to human rights for all faces new challenges related to majority-minority discourse in the era of globalisation and `supremacist jingoism’ promoted by few global political leaders. The emergence of global superiority States which openly and unashamedly affirms discrimination of minorities, that nurtures xenophobia exposing migrants to fear, insecurity and violence cannot remain un-resisted.

Resistance is our culture. Solidarity is our strength. Diversity our celebration.

Once again, thank you very much for the opportunity to join this conversation.