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Dear Prime Minister,

On behalf of our members and supporters across the UK, we urge you to support the creation of a Commission of Inquiry on Sri Lanka at the forthcoming UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) session in March 2014.

Nearly five years after the end of the civil war, a lasting peace is not in sight. When you visited the country for CHOGM 2013 you saw firsthand the fear and sense of injustice that persists, not just among minorities or activists, but among ordinary people trying to rebuild their lives. Your historic visit put a spotlight on a number of unresolved issues, including ongoing human rights violations such as torture, disappearances and sexual violence; credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity; and the lack of progress towards reconciliation. Left unaddressed, we fear that these issues could lead to renewed conflict.

The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) is making great efforts to brush aside these issues, saying it needs more time and that development should be its priority. But this approach ignores the pillars of your 'golden thread' for development, namely the rule of law, good governance, respect for rights and strong institutions. Instead of improvements, these areas have seen continued erosion – even deterioration – since the war ended in 2009.

We understand that post-conflict processes take time but, as you pointed out during your visit, what matters is "getting on the right pathway". Five years on, the GoSL has shown itself unwilling to do so.

There has been no real effort to address war crimes allegations, despite the existence of credible and independently-verified evidence. Nor has there been a genuine attempt at reconciliation. The GoSL has made only token progress on implementing the recommendations of its own "Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission", which did not, in any case, adequately address the allegations or root causes of the conflict.

Any steps it has taken have been carried out reluctantly, usually timed to coincide with a UN meeting or report. Sri Lanka has a history of setting up domestic commissions that produce no outcomes. This is part of the underlying culture of impunity that affects individual cases, like that of murdered British tourist Khuram Shaikh, as well as the treatment of widespread abuses.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has been quoted as saying that the lack of progress “can no longer be explained as a function of time or technical capacity, but that it is fundamentally a question of political will”. In her report to the March UNHRC session, she states that it is questionable whether any domestic body could carry out an impartial investigation, given the level of interference in public bodies and harassment of human rights defenders.

For these reasons, we urge you to stand by your call for an international inquiry, which we believe is the only way to put Sri Lanka onto a path to justice and reconciliation. Little has changed since your visit in November, with the exception of a PR and lobbying campaign by the GoSL aimed at avoiding censure at the March session of the UNHRC.

We hope that the UK will champion robust action at the Council and make every effort to work with the broad coalition of countries from across the world that supported action on Sri Lanka in 2013.

Your visit brought hope to many people in Sri Lanka. Please don't let them down.

Yours sincerely,

Keith Best, Freedom from Torture

Mark Lattimer, Minority Rights Group International

Carla Ferstman, REDRESS

Fred Carver, Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice

Natalie Samarasinghe, United Nations Association – UK