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Abbott Government out of step on Sri Lankan War Crimes

"To ensure the success of domestic refugee policy it seems the Prime Minister is willing to brush aside credible allegations of war crimes against the Sri Lankan Government" John Southalan, President of ALHR said today. "The Prime Minister's comments seem to place more importance on the fact that the civil war ended rather than the way in which that end was achieved - with the reported deaths of 40,000 civilians, many in so called 'no fire zones' which were shelled by the Sri Lankan Government."

The Expert Panel appointed by the UN Secretary General found numerous flaws in the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission set up by the Rajapaksa Government concluding that it was a "platform for presentation of the government's version of events." The UN report found that a complementary international investigation was "imperative". "Despite this Prime Minister Abbott talks of 'binding up wounds' but without supporting calls from other members of the international community for an independent investigation into war crimes" Mr Southalan said. "Mr Abbott is completely out of step with the UN Human Rights Council and key Commonwealth countries such as the UK, Canada and India."

"Mr Abbott's suggestion that Sri Lankans are now living in a society of greater freedom and security does not accord with the ongoing reports of disappearances, harassment and intimidation from security forces, forced eviction and torture. It also completely ignores the almost total power held by the President and the breakdown of the rule of law including the dismissal of the Chief Justice and the assault and harassment of other judges, lawyers and journalists" Mr Southalan said.

"Our Prime Minister appears to be turning a blind eye in order to keep Sri Lanka on side to stop the boats; however, reinstating the rule of law and holding war crimes perpetrators accountable would end the need for Sri Lankans to seek asylum" said Mr Southalan. "International law makes no excuses for war crimes and torture. On the eve of signing a cooperation agreement with Sri Lanka, when questioned about allegations of torture, Australia's Prime Minister suggests that 'we accept that sometimes in difficult circumstances, difficult things happen'. What has happened and is happening in Sri Lanka is more than a 'difficult situation' it is a violation of the most fundamental human rights. The perpetrators must be held accountable and our Government should be joining with the international community in calling for an independent investigation, not making excuses for it."

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ALHR (Australian Lawyers for Human Rights) is a network of Australian lawyers active in practising and promoting awareness of international human rights standards in Australia. ALHR has a national membership of over 3000 lawyers and law students, with active National, State and Territory committees.