



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 9

**Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related  
forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation  
of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Jeunesse Etudiante Tamoule, 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.

[31 May 2021]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **History in flames: remembering the burning of Jaffna Library an act of singhala racial extermination policy of Tamils culture.**

At midnight on May 31, 1981, the Jaffna Public Library, the crucible of Tamil literature and heritage, was set ablaze by Sri Lankan security forces and state-sponsored mobs. The burning has since been marked by Eelam Tamils as an act of genocide.

Over 97,000 unique and irreplaceable Tamil palm leaves (ola), manuscripts, parchments, books, magazines and newspapers, housed within an impressive building inspired by ancient Dravidian architecture, were destroyed during the burning. Some texts that were kept in the library, such as the Yalpanam Vaipavamalai (a history of Jaffna), were literally irreplaceable, being the only copies in existence. It was one of the largest libraries in Asia.

“A city’s public library is the eye of the city by which the citizens are able to behold the realness of their heritage, and behold the still greater greatness of their future.”

On the 2nd of June every year, Tamils all over the world wake-up with sorrow and grief - over an event that took place twenty-one years ago. It started with the citizens of Jaffna waking up, that many years ago on this fateful morning, to an absolute horror.

On the night of 1st June 1981, the splendid Jaffna public library, housing 97,000 rare books and manuscripts, was burned to the ground. The shock experienced by the men, women and children of Jaffna that morning is indescribable. That day all Tamils lost a piece of themselves. It was the most magnificent piece of architecture (leave aside the treasure it contained) ever created in Tamileelam.

This act of arson was carried out, not by a bunch of nameless hooligans, but by a posse of two hundred officers of the Sri Lankan police force, taken to Jaffna by two senior Sri Lankan Cabinet Ministers (Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake, both self-professed Sinhala supremacists), ostensibly to oversee an election.

These two Sinhala Cabinet Ministers, who watched the library burn from the verandah of the nearby Jaffna Rest House, subsequently claimed that it was an ‘unfortunate incident’, where a ‘few’ policemen ‘got drunk’ and went on a ‘looting spree’, all on their own. This ‘justification’ has been echoed, and re-echoed, by many Sinhala leaders and the Sinhala media.

The destruction took place under the rule of the UNP at a time when District Development Council elections were underway, and two notorious Sinhala chauvinist cabinet ministers - Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake - were in Jaffna. Earlier on in the day, three Sinhalese police officers were killed during a rally by the TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front).

Let us look back.

Even in isolation of the hundreds (perhaps thousands) of other raids on Tamils and their properties in the island, this was certainly not the work of ‘drunken-looters’. Looters looking for merchandise don’t burn libraries, even when they are drunk. They do scorch shops and homes after pillaging them, which they did the previous night in the Jaffna bazaar. But, on that night of June first of 1981, they surely weren’t looking to steal books. They were going about decisively and purposefully to wipe out the most treasured cultural possession of the Eelam Tamils – the Jaffna Public Library. And, more importantly, they were under the direct supervision of two Sinhala cabinet ministers of the Sri Lanka government, who had traveled all the way from Colombo to be there.

For Tamils this is only an example, albeit the most glaring, in the grand scheme of genocide in Sri Lanka. Living in a country that constitutionally displays a penchant for Nazi style mono-ethnicity and ethnic purity (in a flag, an official language, and a state religion) for the last fifty years, and having lived through multiple state-sponsored pogroms to eradicate the identity of all others (the Non-Sinhala-Buddhists), there can be no doubt that this was an act of genocide.

Cultural destruction is an integral part of genocide, and literary-works of the target groups is prime game. The practice of ‘book-burning’[i] by the Nazis in the early thirties, as a prelude

to the holocaust, is well documented. Frequent public street-side burning of books by the Nazis, primarily those of Jewish writers, such as Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, eventually led to the attack on the Berlin library on 10 May 1933. On this fateful day in 1933, under orders from Doctor Goebbels (Hitler's Minister of Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment!), Nazi gangs raided the Berlin library and burned truckloads of books. Unlike their Sri Lankan counterparts, however, they didn't burn the building!

Burning of books (or a library full of books) is not the only similarity between the Sinhala government(s) and that of the Nazis.

### **Dr. Joseph Goebbels**

The resemblance of the Nuremberg Laws<sup>[ii]</sup> (1935), which defined the requirements for citizenship in the Third Reich, to that of the Sri Lankan Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949 is truly remarkable. The anti-Tamil Genocide acts of 1956, 1958, 1961, 1977-1979, 1981, and 1983 are exact replicas of the Kristallnacht of 9-10 November 1938.

- Report of the Movement for Inter Racial Justice and Equality [1981]

The Jaffna library was an institution built lovingly by the citizens of Jaffna and well-wishers, with no government assistance whatsoever.

There were about 97,000 valuable books, old newspapers and magazines up to the torching of the library on June 01, 1981."

The government of Sri Lanka, which gets involved in building Buddhist monuments, temples and convention centers, never contributed even a penny.

The burning continued unchecked for two nights.

Homes and shops across Jaffna town were also set alight by the mob, including the TULF headquarters and the offices of the Eelanadu newspaper.

Virginia Leary wrote in *Ethnic Conflict and Violence in Sri Lanka - Report of a Mission to Sri Lanka on behalf of the International Commission of Jurists*, July/August 1981, that "the destruction of the Jaffna Public Library was the incident, which appeared to cause the most distress to the people of Jaffna."

The Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Equality said in a report, after sending a delegation to Jaffna,

"If the Delegation were asked which act of destruction had the greatest impact on the people of Jaffna, the answer would be the savage attack on this monument to the learning and culture and the desire for learning and culture of the people of Jaffna... There is no doubt that the destruction of the Library will leave bitter memories behind for many years."

The scholar and community leader, Reverend Father David reportedly died from shock days after the incineration of his beloved institution. While his statue in the library courtyard is surrounded now by the spirit-soothing greens of local flora, his demise epitomises the loss suffered by every member of the Tamil nation alive on that day, and each generation born afterwards: the irrevocable loss of memories, of the lives and deaths of our predecessors, of the beauty they created as well as of the destruction they may have wreaked.

In 2001, then mayor of Jaffna Nadarajah Raviraj stated that the burning "is in my memory". "Still I feel like crying after 20 years," he said. Mr Raviraj was assassinated in Colombo in November 2006. Still no-one has been held accountable for his murder.

Despite Tamil attempts to memorialise the catastrophic event, by keeping part of the burnt wreckage preserved, the Sri Lankan government allegedly insisted on ensuring all areas of the building were completely rebuilt, leaving no signs of the damage done.

Yet, in 2010 the library was once again vandalised by a group of Sinhalese tourists. The Sinhalese group had attempted to gain access to the library whilst it was closed for an All Ceylon Medical Association seminar that weekend. Denied entry the "tourists reacted by

running amok” said the BBC, “breaking some of the shelves and throwing books on the ground”.

They also went on to vandalise a statue of veteran Tamil politician S J V Chelvanayagam, remembered across the Tamil nation for spear heading the Vaddukoddai resolution.

In December 2016, an ‘apology’ for the burning, by current Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, was criticised - after initially receiving praise as a step towards reconciliation; the offhand manner in which it was delivered revealing a marked disregard for how deeply Tamils on the island continue to mourn the burning.

### **Recommendations:**

41 years later there are no any compassion from Sri Lankan Sinhala authorities neither from international community, we ask to the United Nations mechanism to recognize those acts as acts of Structural Genocide against Eelam Tamils.

We invite OHCHR special procedures mandates holders and Treaty bodies expert to have a Commission of inquiry on that barbary against Eelam Tamils cultural heritage.

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Gouvernement en Exil du Tamil Eelam, GLOBAL TAMIL MOUVEMENT, ASSOCIATION DES CHRETIENS TAMOULS POUR LA PAIX ET JUSTICE, Centre Bishop Rayappu Joseph pour la Justice et la paix, ASSOCIATION DES ANONYMES ET PERSÉCUTES DU GÉNOCIDE TAMOULE, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.