

Tamil lawmaker becomes Sri Lanka's opposition leader

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Colombo: Sri Lanka's Parliament on Thursday recognized an ethnic Tamil lawmaker as the opposition leader for the first time in decades in what is seen as a positive step toward postwar reconciliation with the minority community.

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya announced that Rajavarotheyam Sampanthan, leader of the Tamil National Alliance, was the official opposition leader.

It is the second time an ethnic Tamil has been opposition leader. Appapillai Amirthalingam became opposition leader in 1977 but resigned five years later after refusing to swear that he would not promote a separate state for Tamils.

A separatist civil war broke out soon after and continued until it was crushed by the island nation's military in 2009.

According to a conservative estimate by the United Nations about 80,000 to 100,000 people were killed in the conflict, but the actual toll is thought to be much higher.

The TNA emerged as the third-largest party in the 225-member Parliament in last month's election but a decision by the first two parties led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and President Maithripala Sirisena, respectively, to form a consensus government made the TNA the largest opposition party.

The TNA was earlier backed by the defeated Tamil Tiger rebels and was accused of being their mouthpiece in Parliament. However, since the rebels' defeat the party has renounced separatism and said it would accept regional autonomy based on a federal model.

Sampanthan's appointment despite early opposition by some ethnic Sinhalese leaders is seen as a reassurance to the Tamil community of their place in national politics. Tamils have long complained of discrimination in education, government jobs and governance.

Since his surprise win in a presidential election in January Sirisena has taken a number of steps, including releasing military-occupied private lands to their owners in the Tamil majority north and moving the military out of police and administrative functions, to promote reconciliation.

The steps have helped improve Sri Lanka's image internationally.

The United Nations Human Rights Council will release a report on war crimes allegations later this month. But the United States, which earlier was at the forefront calling for an international investigation into the allegations, has promised to present a "collaborative resolution" with Sri Lanka to the council supporting Colombo's move to conduct a local investigation.

- AP