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EDITORIAL

Time for Justice in Sri Lanka

By The Editorial Board

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Just a little over a year ago, voters in Sri Lanka rallied to elect a new president, with high hopes that he would usher in a new era of government accountability and bring healing to a country fractured by the brutal civil war that ended in 2009. President Maithripala Sirisena has taken bold steps to fulfill those hopes since his election last January.

But the wounds of war cannot be healed until a transitional justice process demanded by the United Nations in a resolution last October moves forward. On that score, Mr. Sirisena says his government will not act “in haste.” This is unacceptable. Atrocities were committed by both Tamil rebel troops and the Sri Lankan Army during the civil war. The perpetrators must be brought to trial.

Mr. Sirisena has amply demonstrated a capacity to lead during the year he has held office. He has presided over promised parliamentary elections, and has moved to dismantle the cronyism and the repressive regime of his predecessor, Mahinda Rajapaksa. He has also moved to include Sri Lanka’s minority Tamils and Muslims in the country’s governance, to release political prisoners and to allow more freedom of expression. And he has righted the Rajapaksa government’s tilt toward China, taking a balanced approach to Sri Lanka’s foreign relations that includes warmer relations with India and the United States. This month, Mr. Sirisena announced the beginning of a process to draft a new constitution.

These are welcome steps. But they are no substitute for justice. Troubling allegations of torture under Mr. Sirisena’s watch — which his government denies — must be addressed. Military leaders who oversaw the bloody operations that killed as many as 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final months of the war remain in command, and have even been promoted. A dangerous anti-Muslim campaign by Sinhalese nationalists is threatening to

further fray Sri Lanka's ethnic fabric.

Last fall, the United Nations agreed to allow Sri Lanka to set up its own special court on war crimes. Mr. Sirisena needs to move quickly to fulfill his government's obligation to the United Nations and its moral duty to Sri Lankans.

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