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Sri Lanka Tamil national anthem row reignites

Tamil politicians in Sri Lanka have criticised a decision to make school children in the northern town of Jaffna sing the national anthem in Sinhala.

They say it is "totally wrong" to make people sing in Sinhala when people in the north and east mostly speak Tamil.

Earlier this month, a Tamil minister in the Sri Lankan cabinet denied reports that the Tamil version of the anthem had been abolished.

He said that President Rajapaksa had decided to keep both versions.

Traditional Industries Minister Douglas Devananda said that while the idea was discussed in cabinet, no agreement had been reached.

The BBC's Azzam Ameen in Colombo says that the issue over the language of the anthem is highly sensitive in Sri Lanka following the defeat of Tamil Tiger rebels in May last year after more than two decades of fighting.

The government has been accused by critics of triumphalism since its victory.

'A joke'

According to reports, Tamil students in Jaffna were forced to sing the Sinhala version of the anthem at a ceremony headed by Prime Minister DM Jayaratne to commemorate the sixth anniversary of the catastrophic tsunami that claimed more than 30,000 lives in 2004.

"Although arrangements were originally made to sing the anthem in Tamil, students were hurriedly trained to sing it in Sinhala on instructions from higher-ups," the independent Daily Mirror newspaper reported on Tuesday.

Mr Devananda - a close government Tamil ally - argued there was nothing unusual about the move because "it was an established practice to sing the anthem in Sinhala in the presence of the president or the prime minister".

But other Tamil politicians disagree.

"The people of the north and east should be allowed to sing the anthem in Tamil as it is the administrative language in those provinces," said former Tamil MP MK Sivajilingam.

"The government should take urgent action to address this problem because it is seen as a pressing issue among the Tamil people."

But Mr Sivajilingam's views are not supported by most Sinhalese politicians: Housing Minister Wimal Weerawansa recently labelled the practice of singing the anthem in Tamil "a joke".

The Tamil anthem is an exact translation of the Sinhala version, sung to the same tune, and has been around since Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948.

The Sri Lankan army defeated the Tamil Tigers in May 2009 after the rebels had fought a 26-year battle for a separate