
The Great White Authorities of HRW

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Response of Prof Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process and Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights to remarks on Sri Lanka made by Non-Governmental Organizations during the Inter-Active Debate on the Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Mr President, let me begin by thanking those Non-Governmental Associations which put in such a sterling performance last evening, running the whole gamut of emotions from A to B. Until they spoke, given the adult approaches with regard to Sri Lanka of the many countries that addressed this assembly yesterday, and the helpful meetings we had with so many responsible authorities, I was thinking that my staying on in a freezing Geneva was a waste of time and energy and money. This last was particularly upsetting, for we are a poor country, and our taxpayers cannot really afford the exorbitant rates for hotels that our well funded NGO colleagues find negligible. At some stage, Mr President, if this privileging of the claims of the unaccountable finger pointers continue, I hope that, in the interests of the economic and social rights of the poor, you will take steps to have sittings of this Council in more affordable settings. Meanwhile let me respond to some of the more outrageous claims of our irresponsible friends, and request Her Excellency the High Commissioner to look further into a response on our websites to a longer effusion from Human Rights Watch, which they referred to in their performance yesterday. I used the word irresponsible, and all I can say is that Human Rights Watch, which refused a meeting with me in Geneva, should really refrain from pronouncements about Sri Lanka made with no reference to any Sri Lankans. Instead they cite several great white authorities, which turn out to be the same authority. HRW refers to a BBC report, which we have shown to be fraudulent, in another release on our websites which I trust you will enjoy reading. That report dramatized an interview with an ICRC official who the ICRC told me had been misquoted. ICRC have now put up the text of the interview on their website, and it shows just how misleading the BBC version was. HRW then quotes the United Nations and one of its spokesmen, Gordon Weiss, but the head of UNDP says – and I quote from an SMS – that ‘he was oddly misquoted. A visiting AP journalist in town for 1 week spoke to him. He referred him to the ICRC report of several days ago, and then the journalist attributed it to GW. Then HRW issued a statement quoting from AP!’ Since then I have been told by the UN that the reference was, not to the ICRC report, for there was none, but to ‘the quote as referred to in the BBC story’. Mr President, Sri Lanka strongly condemns these attempts by interested parties to damage the good relations between Sri Lanka and its partners by such deliberate or culpably careless misquoting. The ICRC and the UN do good work under difficult circumstances, and agencies such as Human Rights Watch with nothing better to do must not waste their time and ours in pursuing clarifications. And this coterie of self-sustaining hysterics is the press that our more circumspect friends in Amnesty International want us to take to the conflict zone. Mr President, we are concerned about our people, and we do not need to be told by people who think that cluster bombs come out of the barrel of a gun how to look after our own. Read the ICRC reports, discuss them with us, but do not think that you know more than people who have to account financially and at elections for their actions. We are aware that the Western press is sensationalistic and confrontational, we do not blame them for that since it is a result of cultural conditioning, but when it includes allegations that are made use of by terrorists, then really some moral self-questioning should be in order. Mr President, I have important things to do back at home rather than playing Sherlock Holmes in a cold and comfortless Geneva, finding out the origins and the rationale for falsehoods. I should be working on rehabilitation and education and empowerment for people who have suffered for so long from terrorism, but unfortunately people take Human Rights Watch seriously, and unless their distortions are dealt with, I might well – as the only person they named in their last diatribe against Sri Lanka - soon be hauled up before the International Criminal Court, and have to spend time in an even more cold climate. Mr President, there are problems in Sri Lanka which we need to solve. We look forward to the cooperation of serious countries and serious people such as the High Commissioner to improve matters. But we also want concerted action to ensure that the civilians now held hostage by the LTTE are set free. I want that, you want that, he and she and it want that, we want that, the LTTE are the only people who don’t want that. So why this coyness about naming them? Indeed, while Human Rights Watch does mention them, in pretending that a democratically elected government and totalitarian terrorists are as bad as each other, the other NGOs, like Victorians with a love that dare not speak its name, do not even mention the terrorism from which we suffer. In the long run though, perhaps that is preferable to what seems the main point of all recent Human Rights Watch assaults on us, the demand that we reach agreement with the LTTE, thus restoring respectability to terrorists. Is this balance? Is this basic decency? This Council, Mr President, should not be about pompous pronouncements from people who cannot even bother to check their references, and think terrorism should reap rewards for its intransigence. This Council is intended to improve the Human Rights of your people and my people and our people, not to provide platforms for those with more money than sense, and swell the coffers of the Geneva hoteliers, whose charm as they made their money Victorian novelists characterized so presciently over a century ago.