
Prof. Wijesinha replies to references on Sri Lanka at the Human Rights Council

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Response of Prof Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat and Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, to discussion of Sri Lanka under Item 4 of the Agenda of the UN Human Rights Council

Mr President, Sri Lanka is grateful for the concerns expressed for our situation by countries that have, while affirming their commitment to Human Rights, made clear their opposition to terrorism and terrorist activity. Let me also take this opportunity to thank the several countries that have helped us without ostentation in our struggle against terror. The statement of Japan, that has never swerved from its encouragement to pursue swiftly a just political solution, is particularly welcome, since it notes our adherence to a policy of zero civilian casualties. We are grateful too to Australia, which has never hesitated to call a spade a spade, and is one of the few countries that, not obsessed by Victorian coyness and old world loves that dare not speak their name, directly names the LTTE when terrorist bombings occur. We will do our best to fulfil their expectations with regard to concern for civilians, our civilians Mr President, whom the government cares for not only for the moral and political reasons we recognize in this Council, but also for the very practical one that they are voters in the democratic process the government intends to restore after many long years of totalitarian terrorist dominance. We have maintained this care and concern in the face of enormous difficulties, Mr President, and we regret the apparent indulgence of terrorism that invokes a spurious balance between the Sri Lankan government and terrorists. We believe it is necessary, as requested, to pursue investigations into violations of human rights as well as basic crimes such as murder, but we deplore confusion between these areas and our difficult struggle against terrorism. We recognize the concentrated concern of the United States on issues that worry us too, and would seek their support for the police training that has not been followed through productively by others – with the notable exception of Sweden, and some input from the United Kingdom - despite ostentatious concern. With regard to the civilians now trapped by the LTTE, we can only reiterate that several months ago we sought support for efforts to ensure that these people were allowed to move, and found none. We have heard of shutting stable doors after horses have bolted, but this is perhaps the first known instance of clamouring that the door be opened long after the prisoners are chained and bludgeoned into helplessness. But, though rescue will not be easy, it is still not too late for a concerted effort, and we hope this will be forthcoming. Finally, if this Council is to have a positive impact, it must work out mechanisms to deal with the behaviour of non-State parties, which already some special mechanisms have tried to address. In particular, while we have no objection to being urged to follow international humanitarian law, which we strive to uphold, with a much better record in this respect than some of our more sanctimonious critics when confronted with terror or the mere suspicion of it, we are astonished at the failure to note our general effectiveness in this regard, even in the face of consistent violations of such law by the LTTE. It is precisely the type of equivocation practiced by the Czech Republic, speaking on behalf of the whole European Union, that allows the LTTE to continue to recruit children, as pointed out recently by UNICEF, and reiterated yesterday by the UN, which said in a statement ‘The forced recruitments included the 16 year old daughter of a UN national staff member’. This family was amongst the people the LTTE refused to let out in January, which makes us wonder about the ambiguous Czech reference to family reunification, and confirms our deep despair that we have not heard a word of criticism of this from any of you. We can of course understand the silence of the UN in Sri Lanka in this respect, since as they explained they were nervous for their trapped workers. We are not sure however why they have not shared with the High Commissioner, and through her this Council, their belief that, on the occasions on which they could identify the direction from which firing came, it was by the LTTE. We also do not understand why they have not shared with her information which they were willing to share with one of their European NGO partners, that satellite images indicated that the number of civilians in the safe area was at most 100,000, not the 180,000 the High Commissioner used in her recent statement. Though even that figure is too many for the LTTE to continue to hold, it does give a different perspective as regards the adequacy of the food and medical supplies the government sends in with the support of the ICRC and our government agents who are still supervising the distribution – even though the LTTE recently commandeered some of the vehicles left behind to facilitate this, as expressed in a recent statement by government agents, UN and NGOs, national and international, who had been working on assistance. In this regard, Mr President, we should note that we are not carried away by this European myth about the sanctity of European monitoring, since we have enough evidence of exaggeration even amongst people who, by European standards, must be telling the truth. We too know what our difficulties are, Mr President, and we would hope those who wish to help us will at least give some credence to our own analyses, and appreciate our priorities. Of course the perversions of the LTTE are no excuse for violations of Human Rights, but the corrosive nature of terrorism is too well known to many of you for us to pretend that it will not have its effect, as indeed the High Commissioner herself has indicated in an earlier statement. We welcome assistance therefore to help us correct problems now, and look forward to much swifter progress when we are rid of the terror that all of you should oppose categorically, by putting a stop not only to funding and the purchase and conveyance of weapons of mass and even not so mass destruction, but also to propaganda.