UN: Rights Council turns its back on victims of the double standards of Human Rights Watch

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(Colombo, April 1, 2009) – The Human Rights Council concluded another disappointing session last week by allowing serious discussion of Human Rights issues to be clouded by insistent attacks on selected countries by certain non-Governmental NGOs. Although the President of the Council on occasion called to order some NGOs that engaged in diatribes that had nothing to do with the subjects under debate, he was unable to create a strong monitoring mechanism to address abuse of privileges by Human Rights Watch and other human rights extremists. “It is inexplicable that the Council failed to rein in Human Rights Watch,” said Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary-General of the Sri Lankan Peace Secretariat, “Despite continuing abuse of Tamil civilians by the Tamil Tigers, Human Rights Watch provided an inhuman shield for them by concentrating its verbal assaults more on the elected government than on rank terrorism. This has encouraged the Tigers to continue with further acts of abuse, safe in the conviction that any criticism of these would be countered by assaults on the government by outwardly respectable institutions such as Human Rights Watch.” The situation of the civilians trapped by the Tigers in Sri Lanka continued to deteriorate whilst Human Rights Watch sought to dissuade them from getting away by painting a lurid picture of conditions in welfare centres run by the government. Despite this desperate tactic, which echoed that of the terrorists, more than 20,000 civilians escaped into government controlled territory during the month in which Human Rights Watch kept up its concerted verbal barrage. Unfortunately the Council has not developed a mechanism to require evidence for the claims of non-Governmental organizations representing particular agendas, nor methods to ensure transparency as to the funding that enables them to maintain such regular flows of vitriol. It has also avoided dealing with the technique of insidious finger pointing perfected by such organizations. Human Rights Watch for instance, in the course of its hysterical accusations against the Council with regard to the Democratic Republic of Congo, specified Egypt, China, Cuba, Gabon, Pakistan and the Philippines amongst countries that defeated an amendment on the subject which was favoured by Human Rights Watch. Whilst the dislike of Human Rights Watch for the other countries mentioned does not come as a surprise, it is not known why Gabon had been singled out amongst African countries, since African countries had in general been criticized by Human Rights Watch for having ‘opposed the establishment of an expert mandate on the situation’. Those countries that voted against the amendment favoured by Human Rights Watch to an African proposal were characterized as ‘concerned with preventing strong Council engagement, when they should have been supporting an effective response to Congo’s human rights situation’, according to Julie de Rivero, the Geneva advocacy director of Human Rights Watch who is liberally quoted in Human Rights Watch proclamations released by her office. Human Rights Watch has a history of making wild accusations and then failing to respond to detailed refutations of its falsehoods. During the current session it refused to meet with the Sri Lankan delegation, thus confirming the view that it was unable to face up to clear arguments supported by evidence. It had previously withdrawn from a meeting with a Sri Lankan delegation, when it cancelled a meeting in the British House of Commons to which the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister had nominated a delegate as invited by Human Rights Watch. ‘Such cowardice is not uncommon in those who have special agendas which cannot stand up to light,’ said Wijesinha, who had first had to meet de Rivero as she arrived in Geneva. ‘She did not know anything about the Sri Lankan matter and said so, but then we found that her promise to study the matter and respond to us was yet another instance of prevarication.’ Prof. Wijesinha wrote as follows to Ms de Rivero in 2007 – ‘It was a pleasure to meet you in Geneva on September 5th, and I hope we can go some way towards ensuring that in the future Human Rights Watch can collaborate with the Sri Lankan government in promoting Human Rights. We have respected some of your interventions in the past, and we feel the current unfortunate improper behaviour of some HRW representatives should be dealt with swiftly so that active cooperation might be possible for the future… You told us at the meeting that you were not aware of this correspondence, and explained that you were new to Geneva. Since however you take responsibility for it, and will doubtless have to justify it in Geneva, it seems at best careless for your colleagues not to have shared with you previously our very serious concerns about the report. I hope therefore that you will study the attachments carefully, and let me know whether you still stand by the claim that there are ‘forcible returns of internally displaced persons to unsafe areas’ and ‘a brazen disregard for the safety and well-being of civilians’ on the part of the government. Civilian casualty figures for operations in the East make clear that claims that government forces directed ‘artillery fire at military targets and civilians without distinction’ is a canard as I had pointed out earlier. At the very least, in a document issued last week, some reference should have been made to these facts, as also to the report on resettlement issued by UNHCR.’ Such naivete on the part of Prof. Wijesinha in seeking to engage actively with Ms de Rivero was understandable then, but her continuing silence should have taught Sri Lanka that the promotion of Human Rights was not a Human Rights Watch priority. Sri Lanka nevertheless sought to engage with Kenneth Roth, Director of Human Rights Watch, when he was in Geneva last month, but that meeting too was dodged. ‘Under the circumstances we can only conclude that Human Rights Watch is hell bent on its own agenda, and it does not care if thousands of Tamil civilians are sacrificed through its backhanded defence of terrorism,’ said Wijesinha. ‘Employees of Human Rights Watch are individually accountable for the successes and failures of the organization. Employees in the future will need to take their responsibilities more seriously or compromise their credibility by turning a blind eye to terrorism and well documented human rights abuses whilst making wild allegations without any substantive evidence against states dealing with the abuses of terrorists.’. Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process