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## Sri Lanka at UN Anti-Racism Conference

Wednesday, 29 April 2009

Last Updated Sunday, 29 November 2009

Hon. Douglas Devananda, Minister of Social Services and Social Welfare, led a high-level Sri Lankan delegation to the United Nations' Durban Review Conference, which was held in Geneva 20-24 April 2009 to evaluate the progress made towards achieving the goals set by the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2001.

In addition to Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the UN in Geneva Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka and officers of the Mission, the delegation consisted of Hon. Rishad Bathiudeen, Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights and Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process, and Mr. Yasantha Kodagoda, Deputy Solicitor General. The UN Durban Review Conference was declared open by Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, UN Secretary General, who appealed to the international community, in his address, to grow beyond divisions and move ahead in the fight against Racism. Mr. Miguel d'Escoto, President of the General Assembly, issued a statement in which he pointed out that the most terrible experiences of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance had been generated by models and projects of development that were opposed to human rights. Addresses were delivered by Ms. Navanethem Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Secretary General of the Conference and Mr. Martin Ihoeghian Uhomibhi, President of the Human Rights Council. A statement by Mr. Nelson Mandela was also read out. Speaking during the High Level segment of the Conference, Hon. Douglas Devananda gave a brief history of Sri Lanka's political problems. The Hon. Minister requested the international community to pressurize the LTTE to surrender, or at least to release the rest of the civilians whom they are holding. He also stated that H.E. Mahinda Rajapakse is committed to the full implementation of the 13th amendment to Sri Lanka's Constitution which ensures substantive provincial autonomy, and that further changes, including the establishment of a Second Chamber of Parliament, are being considered. He also made reference to the sittings of the All Party Representative Committee and its proposals for amending the Constitution to devolve more power to the provinces. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights and Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process, intervened in the General Debate, and he was warmly congratulated for his remarks by several Asian and other delegations. Mr. Kodagoda also was actively engaged in rebutting falsehoods presented about Sri Lanka in one of the NGO meetings that took place on the sidelines of the Conference. Hon. Devananda had an opportunity to brief Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, at a lunch hosted by the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Hon. Minister and the delegation also met with the High Commissioner for Human Rights separately at which the delegation thanked the High Commissioner for Human Rights for assisting with the police training which Sri Lanka had long been requiring. The delegation also met with the High Commissioner for Refugees, who welcomed recent developments in Sri Lanka and pledged further assistance. The Hon. Minister thanked the High Commissioner for Refugees for the ready assistance of his staff in Sri Lanka. The Hon. Minister appreciated the ready acknowledgment of Mr. Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, of the care the government had exercised throughout the operations while recognizing the difficulties Sri Lanka faced in dealing with terrorism. The delegation also met with a number of Ministers and other dignitaries from Pakistan, Indonesia, Palestine, Egypt, South Africa, Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador and Mr. Anders B. Johnson, the Secretary General of the Inter Parliamentary Union. As the incoming President of the Non-Aligned Movement, Egypt affirmed its appreciation of the long standing connection between Sri Lanka and Egypt, and spoke of plans to restore the influence of the Movement. The Hon. Minister said he was impressed by the work in Brazil of the Secretariat for promoting Racial Equality, and said that he would suggest a similar Secretariat in Sri Lanka that would also work on Regional disparity, given the limitations on development in many provinces in Sri Lanka that are distant from the capital. During his stay in Geneva the Hon. Minister also interacted with members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Hon. Rishad Bathiudeen declared open the 'Victims of Terrorism' Exhibition at an event organized by the Mission which was attended by many Sri Lankans of all communities as well as other invitees. The delegation gave several interviews to the Press, and conducted a press briefing at the Press Club of Geneva. Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations Geneva 29 April 2009