
Sri Lanka responds to EU and Others

Wednesday, 23 September 2009

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Statement of Prof Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights In the general debate under Item 4 of the Agenda of the Human Rights Council: Human Rights Situations that require the Council's attention Sri Lanka appreciates the concerns about Sri Lanka expressed by countries participating in this debate and records its appreciation, with regard to our efforts to recover from the damage caused by terrorism, of the support and assistance of our neighbours and friends who stood by us in our struggle whilst affirming their concern for an inclusive solution to our problems.

We note the importance in the process of recovery of respect for a) Basic principles of human rights along with the basic principles of law b) National security concerns c) National reconciliation on the basis of democracy and pluralism Balancing these concerns in the struggle against terror was not easy but we believe we succeeded better than most. We welcome support for our future efforts when it is based on understanding of these concerns, and in particular assistance for the resettlement of the displaced which we see as a priority. The civilized manner in which concerns in this regard were expressed in this debate was heartening, and we are grateful too for the support of countries such as Japan and the United States for the demining programme which is a much larger task than is sometimes understood. Whilst we understand concerns for those currently in welfare centres, it should be noted that security concerns for them as for the country at large cannot be underestimated. In a context in which ruthless conscription took place we cannot be too careful. None of the agencies working in areas under terrorist control stood up for the people who had to give one and then two members of their families, and it is that legacy of neglect that we need now to overcome. Thus, while the administration of the centres is in civilian hands, we must ensure security so that terrorism cannot resume its insidious work and subject Sri Lanka to another round of corrosive destruction. With regard to conditions in the camps, we agree that better use could be made of funds that have been generously provided, and in this context, attached as an appendix to the written version of this response, is the text of the representation sent to the UN Independent Expert on Water and Sanitation regarding current neglect of basic sanitation standards. In the process of reconciliation we would draw attention to the elections held recently in which several political parties, including those previously in thrall to terrorism, participated freely. We urge those who share our hopes for reconciliation to promote such democratic forces without indulging those who still hanker after Tiger supremacy. Our people should not have to go through yet another struggle against terror, and whilst we sympathize with those subject to intense political lobbying, we urge a distinction between, on the one hand, a rights based approach that supports a swift return to normality, and on the other rejuvenation in a different but potentially equally dangerous form of those who funded and advocated on behalf of terrorist excesses.

Appendix - Neglect of basic sanitation standards Memo sent to the Independent Expert on Water and Sanitation When the Welfare Centres were first established, the government tried to set up model facilities. This led to the suspicion that they were intended to be permanent structures, and therefore international agencies laid stress on the temporary nature of the facilities they would provide. They insisted therefore that emergency assistance was for facilities intended for a three month period and that, if they were needed for a longer period, then they would be upgraded. Emphasis therefore was on very basic facilities, which it was assumed could self destruct after a few months. One example of the relatively shoddy nature of the facilities provided was the type of tent provided in bulk in April when over 100,000 persons escaping from the LTTE came to Vavuniya. Instead of the tarpaulin covered shelters that UNHCR had described, these people were provided with very low tents, some of which clearly need replacement now. Government has also had to insist on the covered centres for relaxation, which were promised at the time, but were forgotten so that the displaced had to shelter under trees during the day. The worst area of sub-standard facilities however was that of sanitation. Without consulting the relevant Sri Lankan authorities, nor abiding by national standards, UNICEF commissioned a number of international NGOs, which seem to have no understanding of Sri Lankan requirements, to build toilets. Albeit at comparatively high cost, they put in toilets with pits made of plywood. These soon began to disintegrate. When the matter was finally taken up by the authorities, and reminders given of national standards, which involved either cement or fibre glass pits, the NGOs argued long and hard and finally obtained a concession to the effect that they could use hard wood. However specifications were also given about the need for soakage pits on the water seal system to minimize wear and tear. The specifications continued to be ignored. Some agencies insisted on using plywood, claiming that they had some still in stock. Soakage pits were not thought of. Shoddy construction continued in new blocks too, even while the toilets in the old blocks were collapsing. Some of these have been under repair since June, and the Head of UNICEF pledged that agencies responsible for constructions that had to be replaced would provide replacements at their own expense, but this has not been done. The toilet pits built by Sri Lankan NGOs, and also by the army in an area in which UNICEF refused to help, have lasted, but those in for instance Block 4 began to collapse in much less than three months. A visit a couple of weeks back revealed gaping holes through which sewage and water could be seen. The UNHCR site expert claimed that some damage had been done to the pits because of widening of drains, but this seemed a shoddy excuse, given that the wood had disintegrated on all sides and on top. He also admitted that, in the course of gully sucking (which the UN now claims must be done more often), plywood did disintegrate, but the remedy was to limit the gully sucking and leave a residue. This would of course lead to even more frequent gully sucking being essential. Sadly the self-destructing toilets are being used for propaganda purposes by those who wish to empty the welfare centres immediately. UNICEF could not, at the last meeting, provide a schedule of damaged toilets, and plans for repair or replacement, even though they had been asked for this. Instead they allow their neglect to lend strength to the claim that the Welfare Centres cannot continue. While clearly it is desirable to expedite returns and ensure decongestion, it was clearly impossible from the start to ensure that all the displaced would leave Centres within three months. The culpable neglect of national standards and the basic dignity of the displaced should not be excused on the grounds that it

would promote a political agenda that may in itself seem praiseworthy. Such neglect threatens the health as well as the comfort of the displaced, and the problems it has led to should be dealt with promptly.