
Sri Lanka: Statement by Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary General of SCOPP - at the HRC - Geneva

Monday, 02 June 2008

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Statement by Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, - Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process at the General Debate on the Annual Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2 June 2008, Human Rights Council, Geneva Let me begin by extending our sympathies to the people of China and Myanmar who have suffered from the recent natural disasters. Despite its own difficulties Sri Lanka tried to provide some assistance, not just because we have been beneficiaries of such in times of difficulty, but also because as the High Commissioner said, this is the duty of governments.

Sri Lanka, in wishing the High Commissioner well for her future, takes this opportunity to thank her, her office, and the various special representatives who work in association with that office, for the advice and assistance they have provided to us over the last year. We also congratulate her on the elegance of the thematic summation in her speech of the various strands that go to make up the ideal to which we in this Council aspire. Her enunciation of the importance of rights that some from more prosperous backgrounds ignore makes clear her wide-ranging commitment, and we are especially grateful that she stressed the need to move from a culture of charity to a culture of entitlements and international solidarity. The recent experience of the Universal Periodic Review amply demonstrated the international commitment to this more comprehensive approach which the High Commissioner's concise philosophical overview today suggested. In that context, Mr. President, we would like to support the comment of the distinguished ambassador from China, that in the reporting there should be greater balance, so as to ensure that the less restricted perspective of the world at large finds better representation. Youthful enthusiasm combined with excessive prosperity sometimes turns a means to an end, and we hope therefore that the High Commissioner's more rounded and circumspect approach will be better reflected in the future. It is in that spirit, Mr. President, that we express our support for the rebuttal provided by the distinguished ambassador from Italy, who like all of us would condemn attacks on individuals based on ethnicity. When these happen, they indicate attitudes amongst other individuals that we hope will change. However the suggestion that the recent attacks against Roma settlements represents policy too was unfortunate, because that in some sense attributes responsibility to the Italian government and, as was suggested, such criticism seems misplaced and should not be made about a member state without clear evidence. Sri Lanka is particularly perturbed about this suggestion, which may have arisen from careless drafting, because we have benefited from Italy encouraging legal migration, and welcoming workers from Sri Lanka in a non-racist approach that we could wish replicated elsewhere. To comment in particular on matters affecting Sri Lanka, we wish to take this opportunity too to express our gratitude to the two Special Representatives who visited Sri Lanka during the last year, and prepared extremely helpful reports. Whilst drawing attention to shortcomings, their whole approach made it clear that they did this to support remedial measures, and they have both, since returning, in both cases to Europe, provided advice and assistance as requested. We look forward to further discussions with Prof Manfred Novak and Prof Walter Kälin, and hope the latter will be able to conduct the workshop on particular rights that was suggested during his visit. This spirit of engagement, Mr. President, should never be abandoned, and we are sorry that in some cases it has been avoided. We are of course used to trying to negotiate with adversaries who withdraw when they do not get what they want, and ignore all invitations to discussion, whether sent direct or through intermediaries. We hope our friends will not act in a similar way, and that Sri Lanka's decision not to have an office of the High Commissioner in the country will be respected. Though at one stage it was indicated that this might preclude further discussion, we are sure that you will ensure that requests for assistance to improve human rights will be met. In this regard we are delighted that, though the UNDP Stocktaking Report on our Human Rights Commission was ignored for over a year, at our earnest pleading it has been brought back into play and the UN Country Team in Sri Lanka recently met the Commission to discuss how to improve its effectiveness. The Report has now finally been brought to the attention of your Head of Capacity Building and, though he would have benefited from seeing it before his visit to Sri Lanka, we are sure that he will work on it actively, and in particular ensure the strengthening of the Regional Centres for which we requested support many months ago. We believe there is a greater role for your In-Country Senior Adviser on Human Rights to play with regard to facilitating assistance, and we are sorry that the last incumbent, who was very positive in her approach, was translated to higher things in Nepal. We hope you will be able to ensure the appointment of an equally qualified replacement, who will work together with us actively to improve capacity and ensure the training of officials who must ultimately bear the burden of responsibility themselves. We hope in this regard that, though other countries such as Australia have come to our aid on this, the initial requests for assistance with regard to witness protection policy and practice, addressed to a previous incumbent of the Senior Adviser position, will now find an active response. We also appreciate the greater awareness that seems to have emerged with regard to the difficulties we face in upholding rights whilst dealing with terrorism. We appreciate the comments made earlier by the President of Slovenia but, while human rights must be protected, we believe that indulgence to those engaged in a terrorist agenda is misplaced. Though we are sorry that in the past there was some suspicion all round about motives, we are grateful to the present UN country team for working together with the government to reintroduce confidence. The recent discovery of a UN employee armed with a pistol pen, for which in earlier times excuses might have been proffered, was this time round dealt with firmly by the UN. This sort of approach, if maintained consistently, will help in ensuring a context in which we can benefit from the much greater good the UN system can help us achieve. Finally, Mr. President, we associate ourselves with the other speakers from South Asia who indicated areas in which the need for greater consultation with this Council must be recognized, and hope that the Council will work together with the High Commissioner's Office to develop this aspect. The campaign for human

rights, like each of us, as the High Commissioner so eloquently put it, carries multiple identities, and we need to respect all of these in affirming the values and principles that each of us embraces, for ourselves, and for each other. Though I cannot be as eloquent as our Russian colleague, let me conclude by affirming that, whatever identity the High Commissioner takes on in the coming years, we have no doubt that the commitment and enthusiasm she brought to this present identity will continue to serve us all. 2nd June 2008