
Sri Lanka welcomes report on right to education

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Statement on behalf of the Sri Lanka delegation by Mr. O.L. Ameer Ajwad, Counsellor of the Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the UN in Geneva under agenda item 3: Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the right to education during the 8th Session of the Human Rights Council, June 4th 2008

Mr. President, My delegation wishes to thank all three mandate holders for their useful reports. We congratulate Dr. Carmona, the new Independent Expert on the question of Human Rights and Extreme Poverty. My delegation takes this opportunity to place on record our sincere appreciation and gratitude to Mr. Arjun Sengupta, former Independent Expert on the question of Human Rights and Extreme Poverty for his valuable and concrete contribution in this area. My delegation welcomes the report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education and his useful recommendations.

Mr. President, Since 1943, education in Sri Lanka has been considered a basic right. The overall aim of the national education policy is to ensure universal access to quality education. The adult literacy rate in the country is comparatively high at 90.7 per cent. In Sri Lanka education at primary and secondary level is free and compulsory all over the country, with university education also being free of charge. In order to ensure better access to quality education for high achieving students in less well resourced areas, 15 000 scholarships are provided annually for students moving from primary to secondary level, to national schools throughout the country. Since the education itself is free, the financial component is provided for maintenance purposes. Education in the State Universities is also free with financial assistance provided. Universities have now been set up in every province, with two in the Eastern Province, plus one university college each in the North and in the East. There are four universities in the Colombo District, in addition to the Open University, all of which admit students from all over the country. The successive Governments of Sri Lanka were committed to continue to provide educational services to all parts of the Island including the conflict affected areas in the North and the East. In addition to providing schools and teacher salaries, the Government provides books and uniforms and conducts public examinations in the conflict affected areas. In the aftermath of the tragic tsunami disaster that devastated Sri Lanka in 2004, we have recorded remarkable achievements in restoring normalcy in the education sector. School attendance of children previously enrolled at Tsunami damaged schools and schools damaged through use as IDP camps have almost been brought back to normalcy. Reconstruction of directly damaged schools has marked major progress.

Mr President, Education is not a static commodity to be considered in isolation from its greater context; it is an ongoing process and holds its own inherent value as a human right. Not only do people have the right to receive quality education, they also have the right to be equipped with the skills and knowledge that will ensure long-term recognition of and respect for all human rights. As the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights observes in the opening lines of its General Comment No. 13, (I quote) : “… education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities.” (End of quote) Thus, Mr. President, a rights-based approach to education is imperative. The goal of a human rights-based approach to education is simple: that is to assure every child a quality education that respects and promotes her or his right to dignity and optimum development. Achieving this goal is, however, enormously more complex. Therefore, my delegation encourages the Special Rapporteur on the right to education to continue and double his efforts to achieve this noble goal world wide.

I thank you.