
Statement made by Prof Rajiva Wijesinha, at the debate on the Universal Periodic Review at the UNHRC

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Statement made on behalf of Sri Lanka by Prof Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, at the debate on the Universal Periodic Review, at the 9th Session of the UN Human Rights Council. The Universal Periodic Review, Mr President, proved a fascinating exercise. It has been a learning experience for Sri Lanka as well as for many others and, as the decision to have this item on the agenda at this session indicates, this is a show that will go on. We hope that, well before the first act draws to a close, we would all have learned the lessons of faith, hope and charity without which this Council would be as an empty vessel, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Sri Lanka, Mr President, was pleased at the recognition of many of our friends that, though we had problems, we had succeeded in maintaining fundamental social and economic rights for all our people. Our efforts in providing health and education at comparatively high levels even to those of our citizens temporarily under the control of terrorists were appreciated, and we intend to live up to the expectations we have created even as the struggle against terrorism enters a decisive phase.

In the areas where we were weak, we had recognized both the problem and possible solutions, and we are glad that now we seem to be about to receive the technical assistance that we had craved. Some of the recommendations of Special Rapporteurs, who had engaged in critical but sympathetic dialogue through their visits, related to an area that should have been addressed earlier. I refer to training for our police who, doing their best under difficult circumstances, need greater familiarity with modern techniques and concepts to enhance their professionalism. Sadly the so-called Police Support Group that donors had set up, in one of those exercises which ends up with no one being responsible, had done very little – with I should note some honourable exceptions – but we will now direct this operation ourselves. I should add that the Office of the High Commissioner, after a period of acting at cross purposes, has agreed to respond positively to our requests in this regard. We hope thus and otherwise to make fuller use of the Senior Adviser stationed in Sri Lanka, a post that was grossly underused and unproductive for several years now. In this regard I would urge those countries which kept insisting on an office of the High Commissioner in Sri Lanka that it is time they accepted reality and the willingness of the High Commissioner herself to proceed in other ways to fulfil our common goals. I would remind them of the sad fate of Trollope's Lady Laura Standish, who was desperately fond of a young man, but never thought of wondering what his interests might be. The poor chap was thrown into jail on a false charge, and ended up marrying the more practical lady who found the evidence that cleared him. In this regard, we are grateful that the Senior Adviser in Colombo who has tried actively to assist the National Human Rights Commission. Previously appeals of the HRC for assistance had been ignored, but we believe this new approach will strengthen an institution that has great potential that was not being fulfilled. Its effectiveness and independence will go far towards helping us fulfil many of the recommendations we accepted during the Review. Meanwhile we are proceeding with the National Action Plan we promised, and have secured the services of the Chairman of the UN Special Committee on Terrorism as a Consultant. UNDP, I should note, has been especially helpful in this regard, whilst the IPU has agreed to assist us to fulfil another pledge, relating to a Seminar for Parliamentarians. This will extend also to new Provincial Councillors, whose capacities and commitment with regard to Human Rights need strengthening. Our Civil Society Advisory Group has proved extremely helpful since it was reactivated, following the earlier resignation of a group whose primary concern was advocacy. They refused reappointment but the Group has been reconstituted with those whose constituencies are in Sri Lanka rather than abroad. We have therefore been able to look at areas of particular concern, whilst using their help to promote Confidence Building and Stabilization measures, through an UNHCR Project, in areas in the North and East of the country that had suffered because of terrorism. We hope that by the time we next report, this Project would have been extended to the remaining Districts in the North, whose inhabitants will require much support in the next few months. With our internal conflict resolved, as the European Union suggested, with terrorism rendered powerless, we will be able to do much more for the rights of all our people.