

6 May 2009

H.E. Dr. Martin I. Uthomi
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cc. Members of the UN Human Rights Council

Sub: Appeal for a Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council on the Human Rights Situation in Sri Lanka

Your Excellency,

The undersigned 90 non-governmental organizations across the globe call upon the UN Human Rights Council to hold a Special Session on the current human rights catastrophe in Sri Lanka, as a matter of urgent concern. We have observed the lack of an adequate response from the Council so far, and herewith repeat our heartfelt appeal to the Council to live up to its own mandate by responding promptly to human rights emergencies.

The human rights and humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka has been repeatedly highlighted by various top UN officials, including the Secretary-General, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons (IDPs), among others, and by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as well as local, regional and international human rights groups. The press statements, reports and news articles which have been produced over the last few months, expressing serious concerns and warnings over the impending tragedy in Sri Lanka are too many to list here.

The UN estimates more than 6,400 people have been killed since the beginning of this year in the fighting between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and many thousands have been severely injured. Staff of the ICRC and international aid agencies, medical personnel and religious workers have been amongst those killed and injured. At the moment, over 50,000 people remain trapped in the tiny area of land controlled by the LTTE, in danger of death and injury from the ongoing fighting and suffering from a desperate shortage of medical supplies, food and water. As the Under-Secretary-General stated in his briefing to the UN Security Council last Thursday, despite the repeated appeals from the UN and from the diplomatic community, the Government of Sri Lanka continues to deny access to the UN humanitarian team into the conflict zone, in order to assess the humanitarian situation and respond to the basic needs of food and medical supplies.

The dire conditions faced by around 170,000 people who fled from LTTE controlled areas to camps operated by the Government are also a matter of grave concern. In particular, restrictions on the freedom of movement of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) and family reunification issues should be addressed by the Government as a matter of priority.

The concerns of the international community regarding the human rights situation is not only limited to the current deterioration which has a specific impact on civilians affected directly by the conflict in northern Sri Lanka. Core problems of discrimination against minorities and impunity for human rights abuses, including by the security forces, have been allowed to go unchecked throughout the country in the past years. As the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances has indicated in its reports, Sri Lanka holds the largest number of cases of disappearances in the last two years; the majority of the victims were from the Tamil minority. Furthermore, since 2006, 18 journalists and media workers have been killed, and more than 70 aid workers including religious leaders working on human rights and humanitarian cause have been killed or disappeared. A series of threats and attacks have been made against human rights defenders, including lawyers and media persons who continue to be arrested and detained without charges. Thousands of Tamil civilians also remain detained without charges.

There is no doubt that the LTTE has also committed heinous crimes against the civilian population in breach of international humanitarian law, and this fact should continue to be condemned and responded to with appropriate action by the international community. However, the primary responsibility for protecting human rights at all times lies with the Government of Sri Lanka, and its military gains against the LTTE do not legitimize the great cost of civilian lives, harassment of the Tamil community, repression of democratic dissent, and the collapse of rule of law in the country.

Lastly, we would like to call for the attention of the Human Rights Council to its own resolution A/HRC/RES/9/9 entitled “Protection of the human rights of civilians in armed conflict”, which was adopted by consensus on 21 September 2008. In the resolution, the Human Rights Council stressed its role and responsibility, pursuant to its mandate, to monitor the implementation of human rights in situations of armed conflict. On this front, we strongly urge the Human Rights Council to uphold its mandate with urgent and concrete actions, that is, to hold a special session on Sri Lanka, include the human rights situation of Sri Lanka into its agenda on a regular basis and immediately send an international mission to assess the needs of those civilians in the conflict affected areas with any unhindered access.

Thank you very much for your attention to this appeal.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of co-signatories:

Yap Swee Seng
Executive Director
Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

1. ADER - Association for Regional Economic Development, India
2. African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (ACDHRS)
3. African Democracy Forum (ADF)

4. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh
5. Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact Foundation (AIPP)
6. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)
7. Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI), India
8. Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)
9. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
10. Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)
11. Association of Family Members of the Disappeared (AFMD), Sri Lanka
12. Bagaicha - Center for Study and Action, India
13. Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), Bahrain
14. Banglar Manabdhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM), India
15. BRAC, Bangladesh
16. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), Egypt
17. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), Cambodia
18. Cardijn Community International (CCI)
19. Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), Argentina
20. Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD), Mongolia
21. Centre for Social Research (CSR), India
22. Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)
23. Conectas Human Rights, Brazil
24. Dalit Association for Social and Human Rights Awareness (DASHRA), India
25. Dalit Solidarity Network - Sweden, Sweden
26. DARSHAN, India
27. De La Salle Brothers, India
28. Democracy Coalition Project (DCP), United States
29. East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP)
30. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), Egypt
31. EVIDENCE, India
32. Fondation Humanus, Cameroon
33. Franciscans International (FI)
34. Friends' Association for Rural Reconstruction (FARR), India
35. Gandhian Unit for Integrated Development Education (GUIDE), India
36. Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)
37. Holistic Approach for People's Empowerment (HOPE), India
38. Human Rights Treaty Monitoring Coordination Committee (HRTMCC), Nepal
39. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
40. Human Rights Working Group (HRWG), Indonesia
41. India Committee of the Netherlands (ICN), Netherlands
42. Indian Social Institute (ISI), India
43. Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), Nepal
44. Information Monitor (INFORM), Sri Lanka
45. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
46. International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR)
47. International Movement of Catholic Students Asia Pacific (IMCS-AP)
48. International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW-AP)
49. Jananeethi and Jananeethi Institute, India

50. Justice and Peace Netherlands, Netherlands
51. Korea Alliance of Progressive Movements (KAPM), Republic of Korea
52. Korean House for International Solidarity (KHIS), Republic of Korea
53. Korean Public Interest Lawyers Group - GONGGAM, Republic of Korea
54. Madurai Multipurpose Social Service Society (MMSSS), India
55. Managing Trustee, Littles - A Centre for Children, India
56. Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights (CMDPDH)
57. Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)
58. MINBYUN-Lawyers for a Democratic Society, Republic of Korea
59. National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), India
60. National Coalition for the International Criminal Court (NCICC), Nepal
61. National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), Pakistan
62. National Dalit Forum (NDF), India
63. National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), Sri Lanka
64. National Network of Mongolian Women's NGOs (MONFEMNET), Mongolia
65. Nonviolence International (NI)
66. North East Network (NEN), India
67. Pasumai Thaayagam Foundation (Green Motherland), India
68. Pax Romana ICMICA/MIIC
69. People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR), India
70. People's Watch (PW), India
71. Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), Philippines
72. PRAHAR, India
73. Praxis - Institute for Participatory Practices, India
74. PSPD - People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, Republic of Korea
75. Pusat Komang, Malaysia
76. Quê Me: Action for Democracy in Vietnam, France
77. REAL, India
78. Rights Education and Development Centre (READ), India
79. RIGHTS, India
80. Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN), Nepal
81. Samvedan Cultural Programme (SCP), India
82. Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives (SWATI), India
83. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), Malaysia
84. Tamils of Northern California (TNC), United States
85. The Other Media, India
86. Tibetan UN Advocacy (TUNA), Switzerland
87. Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR)
88. Village Reconstruction and Development Project (VRDP), India
89. West African Human Rights Defenders Network (WAHRDN)
90. World Organization against Torture (OMCT)

For further information, please contact:

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