

Joint statement of civil society calling for accountability in Sri Lanka

17 September 2014, Bangkok, Thailand

The Sri Lankan Government has engaged in wide-reaching acts of persecution and intimidation aimed at silencing the country's once flourishing civil society.

It is against this backdrop that the undersigned civil society organizations (CSOs) express our deep concern at the actions of the organizers of this conference revoking the invitation of two leading Sri Lankan CSOs, following pressure by the Sri Lankan authorities.

Over the years, our organizations have documented and condemned human rights abuses by both government and non-governmental armed groups around the world, including in Pakistan, India, Nepal, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

The serious human rights violations committed by government security forces have often been justified in the name of increasing security or combating insurgencies or 'terrorism'.

Many of us have a long record of engaging directly with government agencies, including security forces, to seek to improve their record of respect for human rights.

What we have learned is that pushing for security, without respect for the rule of law and human rights, is ineffective and even counter-productive.

Security without justice and accountability is unsustainable.

Torture is a crime under international law, and rooting out the organizational culture that fosters torture demands accountability and the rule of law.

In particular, we are concerned by what has come to be known as the "Sri Lankan model" of counter-insurgency, based on the Sri Lankan government's lawless campaign against an abusive enemy, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in which both sides systematically committed war crimes and gross human rights abuses.

Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan civilians suffered in this struggle.

The conduct of the Sri Lankan armed forces has elicited the serious concern of the international community and led to the establishment, in March, by the United Nations Human Rights Council, of a comprehensive investigation into serious human rights violations and abuses and possible war crimes and crimes against humanity, by both sides to the conflict.

The inquiry is aimed at establishing the facts surrounding the allegations with "a view to avoiding impunity and ensuring accountability."

The Sri Lankan government has refused to cooperate with this investigation.

Instead, it has systematically sought to weaken the ability of journalists and civil society to monitor the conduct of government forces and demand accountability for violations.

The government has engaged in a campaign of threats of reprisals against any civil society that cooperates with the UN inquiry.

For example, the government spokesman and Media Minister, Keheliya Rambukwella, has reportedly threatened all those who intend to provide information to the UN investigation and promised to 'take appropriate action based on the evidence the detractors give'.

That is why it is particularly dangerous that this event has demonstrated the success of the Sri Lankan model in shutting down critical civil society discourse, even in another country, at an academic conference with the purported aim of 'protecting human rights.'

Not only does it contravene the core principles of participation and the rights of human rights defenders, as expressed in the UN Human Rights Defenders Declaration, but it also establishes an unfortunate and tempting lesson for other governments in the region who may also wish to close down discussion on their own human rights performance.

Initially, we were pleased to accept the invitation to "discuss with other NGOs, scholars and the invited members from the security forces, relevant initiatives that [our] organization is undertaking in the protection of human rights in the security sector and to provide critical reflection on their approaches." However, had we been made aware of the full circumstances that led to the absence of our Sri Lankan colleagues earlier, we would have declined to attend the conference.

We now take the opportunity of participation to highlight the dangers of the "Sri Lankan model" and call for accountability for the tens of thousands of Sri Lankans who have been unlawfully killed, "disappeared", tortured and ill-treated, or subjected to other abuse.

Signed:

- (1) Advocacy Forum, Nepal
- (2) International Commission of Jurists
- (3) Cross Cultural Foundation, Thailand