

**Sri Lanka: Government rejects Universality of Human Rights  
Press Release: Asian Human Rights Commission  
25 June 2012**

Speaking at the 20th session of the Human Rights Council, under the agenda item clustered ID with the Special Rapporteur on Health and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Sri Lanka attacked the United Nations' role in developing international norms and standards relating to human rights. Speaking on the issue of education, the government noted in an official statement:

"We would however caution on attaching excessive focus and arbitrary conditionalities on developing norms and standards related to quality education, as many developing countries are as yet grappling with the provision of basic education to their populations. Setting goals which require enormous finances which developing countries are often unable to meet, and placing the onus of responsibility solely on the state will not practically advance the quality of education. Instead, it is suggested that realistic goals be set, which are developed taking in to consideration the particular needs of countries and their respective domestic situations, if we are to successfully improve the quality of education worldwide."

Given that in Sri Lanka, the government has been working to downgrade the school and university education systems; this announcement does not come as a surprise. The implication of this statement is that Sri Lankans are not entitled to the highest standards of education, as the citizens of other countries are. Under the pretext of economic difficulties, the Sri Lankan government wants a different set of educational standards for poorer countries. By this, they mean that the poor deserve a poor quality of education.

The setting of international norms and standards for the protection of human rights is the most important function of the United Nations' human rights agencies. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, this has been the United Nations' human rights agencies most significant project. The covenants and conventions have been developed to ensure a similar entitlement of rights for people in all countries, so that basic rights can be enjoyed by every person.

As such, to attack the making of international norms and standards is to strike at the very heart of the United Nations' human rights project. Sri Lanka's present government has been consistently engaged in this attack since its formation.

In relation to the resolution passed by the United Nations' human rights council on the issue of accountability and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, the thrust of the attack by the Sri Lankan government relates to civil and political rights. The Sri Lankan government is vigorously pursuing a project in which international humanitarian and human rights legal codes will be reformed so as to allow serious violations, thus denying the universality of human rights..

During the mid-twentieth century, Sri Lanka was one of the countries which was heralded as a model for other developing nations in light of its progress in establishing quality infrastructure, such as education. There was good reason to hold Sri Lanka in such high esteem at this time. Indeed, from the early 20th century when Sri Lanka was under colonial rule to the early part of the independence period, achieving a higher quality of life for the people of Sri Lanka was one of the government's central goals.

Today, this pursuit of a higher quality of life is suffering due to the incredible level of neglect. Indeed, Sri Lanka has been reduced to a lawless place. The accusation of lawlessness comes from the highest levels of society. Cynical remarks are frequently made regarding the fact that Sri Lanka has a parliament, but does not have parliamentary

democracy, that Sri Lanka has courts but lacks an independent judiciary to preside over these courts, and that Sri Lanka has a rule of law system but is nonetheless becoming a lawless nation.

It is quite clear that this deplorable state of affairs has not come about by accident, but is the product of design; the statement made by the Sri Lankan government at the United Nations is testament to this ideological position. These government officials believe that it is acceptable to deny the basic standards of life to the people of Sri Lanka, in terms of civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights. Moreover, they believe that such a viewpoint is justified on the basis of the idea that people in poorer countries cannot have a high standard of life that others in wealthier countries are able to enjoy.

Sri Lanka is a member of the United Nations. When the Sri Lankan government challenges the efforts of UN human rights bodies and officials to define international norms and monitor the upholding of these standards, it is attacking the core of the United Nations' project on human rights. As such, what justification can Sri Lanka make to remain within this assembly of nations which is primarily devoted to defining universal standards and monitoring their progress?

The universality of human rights is at the heart of the basic philosophy of human rights. In attacking the notion of the universality of human rights, Sri Lanka is attacking the fundamental tenets upon which human rights norms stand. The statement made by the Sri Lankan government at the 20th session is clear evidence of the new direction that the Sri Lankan government is taking to renegade from the enterprise that the world became engaged in when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was enshrined as a basic, global agreement.

About AHRC: The Asian Human Rights Commission is a regional non-governmental organisation that monitors human rights in Asia, documents violations and advocates for justice and institutional reform to ensure the protection and promotion of these rights. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984.

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