

Joint Statement

Civil Society Solidarity with International Humanitarian Organisations

17th January 2008, Sri Lanka: In recent months, there has been a concerted effort by sections of the polity and media to discredit international humanitarian organisations and UN agencies by accusing some of them of being supporters of the LTTE. As members of civil society we are very concerned about these allegations and the manner in which these agencies have been treated, which seemed to be aimed at damaging the credibility of these organisations and of other NGOs that have a long track record of service to the war, disaster-affected, and poverty stricken sections of the Sri Lankan population.

Where it concerns the war affected civilian population in the north and east, it is these humanitarian organisations that have often been the main source of institutional solace to the people. We have witnessed first-hand people in internally displaced camps in the north and east, who affirm that their main if not only consistent source of support has been these international humanitarian organisations.

Last month, UNESCO, which aided reconstruction of schools in the south after the Tsunami, was criticised for condemning an attack against civilian the Voice of Tigers radio station in Kilinochchi. Other media freedom agencies too condemned this attack, on the basis that it was not a military target. 3 staff members of VoT and 6 civilians were killed in the attack. Likewise, the Berghof Foundation, which has given considerable support to government and civil society staff at all levels, has sustained harsh criticism, to the point where its director has had his visa twice-revoked.

Two more international organisations that have endured focused criticism are UNICEF and Save the Children in Sri Lanka (SCSL). UNICEF staff members both international and local have been criticized for attending a protest against the abduction and killing of two SLRC workers in June 2007. UNICEF is a driving force to build a world where the rights of every child are realized and believes that everyone has a responsibility to see that children are safe. SCSL is part of the world's oldest, independent international alliance for children (formerly known in Sri Lanka as Save the Children Fund, SCF) working for the protection and full realization children's rights. UNICEF and SCSL work very closely with the National Child Protection Authority of Sri Lanka which aims for the prevention of child abuse, protection and rehabilitation of victims of abuse. Both SCSL and UNICEF have long track records of humanitarian assistance and promoting the rights of children in this country. In particular they have taken many measures to bring the problem of child recruitment by the LTTE, and more recently by the Karuna group, to international scrutiny. Both agencies also play a vital role in providing other essential services including supporting educational services for children and water and sanitation for the displaced.

Among other accusations, UNICEF and SCSL have been charged with working in collaboration with the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), which was recently banned in the United States and Sri Lanka for having been a conduit for the raising of funds for LTTE arms purchases. Both agencies have worked with the TRO on a number of projects but ceased their relationship in 2006 when TRO came under increased government scrutiny and its bank accounts in Sri Lanka were sealed. However, prior to this, and particularly in the period of the two previous governments when the peace process was at its height, as well as after the tsunami, the government itself encouraged humanitarian organisations to work in partnership with the TRO, which itself had been a duly registered NGO. Both organisations have invited the government to investigate all of the allegations against them which is a sign of good faith and also an example of transparency that is a model for others in the country. However, the ongoing investigations have led to a near paralysis of these organisations. They are pre-occupied in supplying the government with information dating back several years and their staff is being demoralized by the constant propaganda attacks against them.

Recently, the government's Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (CCHA) committee joined with international donors to condemn public criticism until pending investigations have concluded

and parties have presented their cases. We appreciate that the government and the CCHA, in making this move of support for the United Nations and other international organisations providing humanitarian assistance, seemed to have accepted that the past criticism was not warranted.

Disparaging UNICEF and SCSL hurts the most needy and vulnerable sections of the people in Sri Lanka, including a large number of people for whom the government is obliged to provide basic needs and essential services and is unable and unprepared to reach at the present time. The criticisms of agencies such as UNICEF and SCSL compromise their ability to carry out humanitarian and development work and put the safety and security of their staff at risk. The naming of staff members by politicians and the media has increased the sense of fear as well as demoralize other humanitarian workers in other organisations. The attacks on UNICEF and SCSL are part of a series of attacks on humanitarian agencies. Over the last two years humanitarian agencies have faced multiple incidents of violence including killings and disappearances of humanitarian staff, attacks against offices and vehicles, and threats and intimidation which has made working in Sri Lanka all the more challenging.

The channeling of humanitarian aid via NGOs has been a dominant problem of aid flow globally. We agree that it is essential for INGOs and NGOs to be publicly accountable and transparent in terms of the funds and practices. Charges alleging the misuse of funds must be investigated, and we recommend that the Government strengthen its monitoring mechanisms and make its NGO Secretariat more effective. We oppose efforts to make these efforts at inquiry into a witch hunt with the sole purpose of discrediting these agencies without granting them the space to respond to the particular charges, as ultimately it is the most needy and vulnerable people of Sri Lanka that suffer the consequences. On the basis that some NGOs are accused of misappropriating or misusing funds, we cannot condemn and discredit all associated agencies and reject international support, especially from the UN, that continues to benefit the most needy and vulnerable people of Sri Lanka. While upholding the principles of accountability and transparency, we call on all actors, including the Government, political and armed groups and the media to be responsible in their efforts to making charges against agencies.

As local civil society actors who believe in partnership with international civil society, we stand in solidarity with the staff of all national and international agencies and organisations that are committed to strengthen initiatives for peace, development, democracy, and respect for human rights in Sri Lanka. We welcome the courage of those who have joined us in protests against the very visible human rights violations presently taking place in our country, and regret that they were subjected to criticism for that reason.

Association of War Affected Women

Centre for Human Rights and Development

Centre for Policy Alternatives

Equal Ground, Sri Lanka

Free Media Movement

INFORM

International Centre for Ethnic Studies - Colombo

International Movement Against Discrimination and Racism

Law & Society Trust

Mothers and Daughters of Lanka

Muslim Information Centre - Sri Lanka

National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Rights Now Collective for Democracy