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Facebook responds to open letter from Sri Lankan civil society

April 12th 2018, Colombo, Sri Lanka: A day after [our open letter to Mark Zuckerberg](#), Facebook representatives from Delhi, India, on his behalf, responded. The email is reproduced below in full. It is worth noting at the outset that this is the first official response from Facebook we have received after many years of engaging with the company around the issues flagged in our open letter.

We are very pleased that Facebook recognises that there “is no place... for hate speech, incitement to violence, and other content that violates... Community Standards.” The company also notes that it is increasing the number of Sinhala-speaking content reviewers and will engage with civil society in addition to government, going forward. Though long overdue, these are all welcome developments and commitments.

However, we are disappointed that much of the response only states what was already known or in the public domain and is without any concrete action or measure tailored to country, language and issue specific challenges and context we outlined in some detail. Our open letter, endorsed by a dozen other civil society organisations, captured the gross negligence of Facebook when dealing with gender-based violence, including content normalising rape and condoning sexual violence against girls and women. We asked for a clear indication around the precise number of content reviewers, their location and their gender makeup. We also asked for clear guidance around the timely, effective resolution of user generated reports, particularly during heightened violence.

Facebook however does not clarify or commit.

We recognise that Facebook is “investing in artificial intelligence tools” to help with the identification of “certain types of content faster and more accurately”. This echoes what has been promised around the context in Myanmar. We remain deeply sceptical. Our experience suggests that reporting posts where text inciting harm or violence is superimposed on a non-offensive image - and is not in the body of the post itself - is usually met with the response from Facebook that the content does not violate Community Standards. While not discounting the value of investing in AI and machine learning over the long term, what the company needs to do right now is to place a greater emphasis on human content reviewers conversant in Sinhala and Tamil.

Facebook continues to brush aside its culpability in allowing for the spread of and engagement with content that incited hate and violence in March alone, with a particularly horrific and widely-reported example noted in our open letter. We are thus asked to trust a company which does not or cannot publicly acknowledge how or where it went wrong to invest in

solutions around non-recurrence. We trust Facebook itself will recognise this as a weak proposition.

In sharing notes with colleagues in Myanmar, we were interested to learn that Facebook had promised them what is also deeply relevant to and resonant in Sri Lanka. Recording our surprise that Facebook didn't in their official response offer us in Sri Lanka these same options, we strongly recommend the company looks holistically at solutions around the challenge of dealing with content inciting hate *across* countries, instead of *ad hoc*, episodic or entirely siloed, country-specific solutions.

In particular, we would like to see Facebook in Sri Lanka, like it has promised to do in Myanmar,

1. Proactively remove hate speech and repeat offenders
2. Improve its review mechanisms and responsiveness
3. Improve the reporting mechanisms built into Facebook apps like Facebook Messenger to make it easier and simpler to report violent or hateful content
4. Work with government and civil society to improve the awareness of Community Guidelines by Sri Lankan users of Facebook services
5. Establish a trusted reporting network that expedites the flagging of content vetted through experienced individuals and institutions.

Understandably, to those at Facebook, we may seem demanding, impatient and even impolite, playing down what the company and its representatives may feel are overtures, concessions and commitments aimed to assuage our concerns and address our challenges.

Our response to this is a simple one. As noted in our open letter, we have flagged these concerns to Facebook for years, to no avail. We do not trust in vague promises anymore. We cannot believe in and are not distracted by cookie-cutter public relations or press releases. We require clarity, focus, public data around stated intent and any related technical or human resource investments, clear reporting guidelines also in local languages, precise response times and independently verifiable key performance indicators around measures taken to address the challenges flagged.

Anything less is just damage control or public relations.

Risking disappointment, we continue to hope for a more honest interaction with Facebook that recognises and indeed, seeks to positively strengthen the vital role it plays in shaping our public discourse, democratic fabric and electoral processes.

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Response from Facebook

11 April 2018

Dear Mr. Hattotuwa,

Thank you for your letter. Mark is currently travelling in Washington, but received your questions and concerns and asked that I respond as quickly as possible.

As Facebook's Director of Public Policy covering Sri Lanka, I share your desire to improve enforcement of our Community Standards, especially for content in Sinhala. There is no place on Facebook for hate speech, incitement to violence, and other content that violates our Community Standards.

As you know from our conversations in March, we are committed to taking concrete steps to address misuse of our platform in Sri Lanka. We are increasing the number of Sinhala-speaking content reviewers on our Community Operations team to provide around-the-clock coverage, and will continue to engage with a diverse group of stakeholders, including the Sri Lankan government and civil society organizations like yours, to curb hate speech and deepen our understanding of local context.

We are also committed to using our product and technology to address these challenges. At the end of March, we displayed messages at the top of News Feed to every person on Facebook in Sri Lanka reminding them about our Community Standards and explaining how to report violating content. We are also investing in artificial intelligence tools to help us identify certain types of content faster and more accurately.

More broadly, we take our responsibility to protect the integrity of our platform, the privacy of people's data, and the right of everyone on Facebook to express themselves freely and safely very seriously. As part of these efforts, we have recently announced [a number of new transparency initiatives](#), including notifications to everyone who may have had their data shared with Cambridge Analytica. We also continue to provide regular updates to our community on changes to our products, including [a recent News Feed FYI post](#) detailing our decision to end the Explore Feed test in Sri Lanka and other countries.

We look forward to continuing to collaborate with you as we work to address the important issues you outline in your letter.

Kind regards,

Shivnath Thukral
Public Policy Director
India & South Asia