

New Version

**Statement by the delegation of Sri Lanka during the Interactive Dialogue
with the Special Rapporteurs on human rights defenders,
and freedom of religion or belief,
11 March 2010**

Mr. President,

We have given consideration to the report of Ms. Margaret Sekaggya, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

With regard to the case of late Lasantha Wickramatunga, Chief Editor of the English language weekly the *Sunday Leader*, my delegation wishes to state the following. Whilst we reiterate the Government's original response, which is on record, the law enforcement authorities have continued to pursue the leads provided by numerous persons with encouraging results of being able to narrow the area of focus, which should facilitate a breakthrough. The progress of the investigations has been reported on a regular basis to the authorities and to the Magistrate's Court.

With regard to the other alleged violations referred to in the Special Rapporteur's report, our responses contained therein are reiterated. The relevant measures to prevent violations are in place and the Government of Sri Lanka will continue to adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards any individual engaging in such activity. May we however hasten to add a note of caution as contained in our statement made last week, and reiterate that the very amorphous nomenclature of "human rights defender" is used very loosely to encompass just about every form of activity however distantly associated with the spheres of the promotion and protection human rights. We must therefore discourage persons presenting themselves as such and making these assertions for collateral purposes of political gain in pursuit of extraneous agendas.

Mr. President,

We thank the Special Rapporteur on religion or belief Ms. Asma Jahangir for her report and engagement with the Government pursuant to her visit to Sri Lanka in 2005. This visit coincided with a time of great sensitivity to the topic of her mandate when the aspect of unethical conversion was in the public domain. This issue however did not gain currency. It was laid to rest due to timely government action together with the majority of people supporting the view that religious sensitivities should not be interfered with, in keeping with Sri Lanka's constitutional guarantees of thought, conscience and religion, and the freedom to practice one's religion. Relevant recommendations made by the Special Rapporteur are being taken cognisance of, in the finalisation of the National Action Plan on Human Rights. The Special Rapporteur will be kept informed of the progress being made in this regard.

Finally, Mr. President, we appreciate the Special Rapporteur's holistic understanding expressed in her report, that Sri Lanka is a country with a high level of tolerance and one which has always experienced religious harmony.

Thank you Mr. President.