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Sri Lanka raises concerns on reference to Sri Lanka in OHCHR press release

Sri Lanka's Acting Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Dayani Mendis, in a letter addressed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has raised concerns regarding the allegations made in a press release issued by the High Commissioner on 03 June 2020 regarding "clampdown" of freedom of expression during COVID-19, in which a reference had been made to Sri Lanka.

The letter highlights that it has become essential for all countries and Governments to take measures to counter misinformation and disinformation in the interest of protecting public health, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures are also in line with the consensus resolution on COVID-19 response adopted on 18 May 2020 at the 73 World Health Assembly (WHA), which also, inter alia, calls on Member States to provide the population with reliable and comprehensive information on COVID-19 and take measures to counter misinformation and disinformation.

Clarifying the content of the internal directive issued by Sri Lanka's Acting Inspector General of Police on 01 April 2020, the letter highlights that the directive *"does not carry instructions to arrest persons for mere criticism, or for sharing fake or malicious messages, except in the case of violations of the laws of relevance on; obstructing a public servant in discharge of his/her duty, wrongful restraint of a public servant, use of criminal force to deter a public servant from discharge of his/her duty, disobeying a quarantine order and acts of disruption of public law & order and quarantine procedures using computer technology."*

The letter also notes that the Government of Sri Lanka has, for several months now, been engaged in the task of protecting the health and safety of its population from COVID-19, amidst a multitude of other challenges associated with facing a global pandemic of this scale. It observed that *"the success of the ongoing efforts of the Government, which were also commended by the World Health Organisation, enabled containing this highly contagious disease and protecting the public, especially the vulnerable segments of society. This has been possible, largely due to the collaboration of all stakeholders with the national response, as well as the communication of accurate information to the public"*. The letter also states that *"the Government has taken these measures in accordance with the due process of law, and in the interest of public safety and health, with the aim of curbing falsehoods that have harmed or have the potential to affect all sections of society during this pandemic"*.

While reiterating Sri Lanka's commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights in terms of the Constitution of Sri Lanka, the Government of Sri Lanka urged the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, to be sensitive to the above unprecedented challenges faced by countries and to engage in a spirit of cooperation.

The full text of the letter sent to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is annexed.

Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka in Geneva

08 June 2020