

**48<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE UN COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF  
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

**INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT BY THE DELEGATION OF SRI LANKA  
Geneva, 26 January 2011**

Madam Chairperson, distinguished members of the Committee,

My delegation and I are pleased to be associated with the examination of Sri Lanka's combined 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> periodic Report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women covering a period which has presented the Government and people with unprecedented challenges. A thirty-year terrorist conflict compelled the State to assume, during all of those years, an expanded and formidable task of maintaining national security, law and order. In these challenging years, the State also pursued an ambitious national development Plan with an emphasis on economic and infrastructure development that sought to enhance the quality of life of its people. The pursuit of peace saw the Government engaging in negotiations with a terrorist movement acknowledged as the most ruthless in the world, which over time lost its credibility as one which had a sincere desire for peace. Finally, in May 2009, terrorism was defeated and the task of rebuilding a fractured nation commenced. As in all situations of armed conflict, in Sri Lanka too, it was the women and children who suffered the most. Sri Lanka's Report is presented highlighting the manner in which its obligations under CEDAW were sought to be honored during this challenging period.

The end of the armed conflict brought with it renewed hope for peace and also new challenges. In the post-conflict phase, the Government has concertedly engaged in harmonizing the economic, social and political life of the people primarily in the areas affected by the conflict through the re-introduction of civil administration and special economic development programmes with a strong focus on rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation. The government of Sri Lanka has sought to deal with these issues through homegrown solutions, and a commitment that is both sincere and determined.

This periodic report also comes at a time when the country had its share of natural disasters with the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004 that devastated almost 2/3rds of its coastline and inflicted serious losses to life and property. The current floods of December 2010/January 2011 destroyed valuable infrastructure in the east and northeast of the country and rendered many homeless, offering us yet again more challenges to rebuild, reconstruct and rehabilitate. All of these disasters had its impact on women. The commitment to honour the obligations under CEDAW has nevertheless continued in earnest, and the progress in many areas has been exemplary while in some, there is a great deal of work that must still be done.

The armed conflict impacted on women in a variety of ways, both direct and indirect. As in all such situations around the world, civilians account for the large majority of those adversely affected and women often assume a disproportionate share of the consequences. It was in this context that Sri Lanka welcomed Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security.

In presenting its Report to the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council in May 2008, Sri Lanka while confirming its recognition of the need to address grave violations of women's human rights in situations of armed conflict, and their potential contribution to peace-building, fully endorsed the approach based on giving greater impetus to gender mainstreaming in the promotion of international peace and security. In its Report, Sri Lanka confirmed its commitment to formulate a National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights with the objective of improving its human rights protection and promotion in all areas, with targets to be achieved in five years. The expectation is that such an initiative would facilitate a holistic approach to human rights protection and promotion, and lead to greater cooperation between government and civil society. In pursuance of this pledge, the process of formulating a National Human Rights Action Plan commenced in 2009.

The process that has been adopted in formulating the Plan is significant in that it has placed reliance on a consultative approach that sought to include civil society. Eight thematic areas one of which is "women" were identified consequent to stocktaking of the human rights situation in the country. The stocktaking involved an examination of Sri Lanka's UPR, all of the Treaty body Recommendations of the past ten years including those of the CEDAW Committee in 2002, recommendations of Special Rapporteurs, and Reports of NGO's submitted during the UPR. This process moved on to conduct national consultations with the involvement of over 200 civil society Organizations as well as relevant Governmental Agencies to identify issues in relation to each thematic area. Eight Drafting Committees that comprised six to ten experts from both Governmental and Non-Governmental members were appointed to prepare a draft Action Plan in respect of each thematic area. An important feature of the draft Action Plan is the inclusion of measurable indicators, emphasizing a serious focus on the monitoring and evaluation component. In September 2010 under a Presidential directive, a Cabinet sub-committee assisted by the Attorney-General was appointed to finalize a composite Plan incorporating the eight thematic Plans. The Plan titled the "National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights" and incorporating a time frame for implementation, is expected to be submitted to the Cabinet shortly.

The Thematic Action Plan on Women has identified issues affecting women under eleven (11) focus areas. These are – (1) Health, (2) Violence Against Women, (3) Political representation, (4) Economic empowerment, (5) Employment, (6) Women in the informal sector, (7) Women migrant workers (8) Women in the rural and Plantation sectors, (9) Women affected by conflict, (10) Environment and (11) Discrimination Against women. The other thematic areas are: Civil and Political Rights, Torture, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Children, Labour, Migrants, and IDPs.

This process has been long and time consuming. However, it is believed that the process is as important as the final product. The seriousness about meaningful and effective implementation of the Plan inspired a process that provides for the input of all stakeholders including those who will assume responsibility for implementation. The inclusion of measurable indicators will ensure that there is a ready platform for Monitoring and Evaluation. We believe that the M&E component will make the difference between a Plan that will work and one that may not.

Prior to this initiative, while the armed conflict was ongoing, several programmes were commenced to ensure a respect for the observance of Human Rights within the armed forces. These included the establishment of a Directorate on Human Rights and Humanitarian Law within the Sri Lanka Army, which conducted awareness programmes and training on human rights and humanitarian law for the security personnel. Human Rights cells were established in each of the three Forces to promote human rights and these cells reported directly to the Service Commanders. The Police department established a Human Rights Division with the objective of strengthening the role of law enforcement officers in the protection of human rights.

The State machinery mandated with responsibilities for human rights, IDP's and ex-combatants was strengthened, with the establishment in early 2006 of a special Ministry vested with responsibilities for human rights as well as the humanitarian assistance that was provided by International Agencies, at the time. There was also the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services, which was vested with responsibilities for the IDP's. The Bureau of Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, which had not been active since the Peace Accord in 2002 was reactivated under the Presidential Secretariat in 2006. Complaints of abuse of women were investigated and a culture of accountability was enforced. During this period, the Ministry responsible for Human Rights received monthly reports from protection Agencies that were mandated to monitor the situation with regard to IDP's and followed up on reports of, inter-alia, sexual violence against women. A Presidential directive of June 2006 gave clear directions as to the norms that should be followed by the armed forces and the police in the event that children and women are arrested or detained.

All of these initiatives confirm Sri Lanka's commitment to the observance of human rights. The action taken also satisfies the specific obligations set out in Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) with regard to the need to deal with the offence of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls.

The massive humanitarian rescue operations that were conducted during the final stages of the war focused on ensuring the safety and security of civilians and on evacuating them from the clutches of the terrorists. The State assumed the responsibility of caring for approximately 300,000 displaced persons, including approximately 12,000 ex-combatants who are now known as beneficiaries, with assistance from relevant UN Agencies.

In the post conflict period, the government has been engaged in the most challenging task, firstly, of caring for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) and thereafter of returning them to their homes, of rehabilitating ex-combatants among whom were women and re-inserting these persons in society. The Bureau of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation was further strengthened with a full time Commissioner-General in July 2009, vested with the special mandate of rehabilitating and reintegrating the ex-combatants. This task has been and is being carried out with sensitivity to Sri Lanka's unique post conflict context and by crafting a way forward based on its own experiences, national and international principles and guidelines and best practices. The Way-Forward on Rehabilitation, Reinsertion and Reintegration (W-RRR), which has been so formulated is a national initiative approved by the Cabinet of Ministers. The W-RRR programme, which treats ex-combatants as "beneficiaries", comprises three phases/segments, namely, Rehabilitation, Reinsertion and Reintegration.

Female beneficiaries were housed in separate centers administered by female school teachers of the National Cadet Corp managed and secured by the Army Women's Corp. The rehabilitation programme provided for establishing of contacts with their families. The programme also included psychosocial and socio-economic profiling with a view to categorizing the beneficiaries for the purpose of pursuing the rehabilitation process.

In the next phase, beneficiaries were re-inserted in their original homes with a three-month reinsertion assistance package, which provided them with support to meet their basic needs including food, shelter, clothing and healthcare upon their immediate return to communities. During this phase, the beneficiaries were supported through the rehabilitation centre and community based support structures.

In the final phase, beneficiaries are assisted with social reintegration and economic reintegration over a two-year period at the local community level. Social reintegration is a process through which the beneficiaries are provided with the necessary community based support networks to facilitate the transition into civilian life. Economic reintegration seeks to provide for the employability of beneficiaries by ensuring that they are engaged in decent, productive and sustainable income generating activities. Enhancing equitable access to education (including catch-up education), vocational training, wage and self-employment, micro finance facilities, and business support services, are features that are essential to sustain the reintegration programme.

All female ex-combatants who were in this programme as beneficiaries have now been released and are back with their families. The underage girls who had been forcibly recruited and who surrendered to the government have all undergone rehabilitation in terms of access to vocational training, literacy classes etc. They are now reunited with their families in their own communities. In terms of a UNICEF database established under UNSC Res. 1612, one third of the terrorist cadres of children forcibly recruited, were girls.

The success of this programme is perhaps demonstrated in a way, through the heartwarming stories of about 30 students who, while pursuing the rehabilitation programme, sat the Advanced Level examination, were successful and gained admission to the Medical and other Faculties of Universities.

In May 2010, His Excellency the President appointed “The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission” (LLRC). The Commission comprises eight (08) members including one woman. In doing so, His Excellency articulated a concern that was real to all of our people *“It has become necessary to reflect on the conflict phase and the sufferings the country has gone through as a whole and learn from this recent history, lessons that would ensure that there will be no recurrence of any internecine conflict in the future and assure an era of peace, harmony and prosperity for the people.”* The Commission is mandated to inquire into and report on, inter-alia, the lessons we would learn from those events and their attendant concerns, in order to ensure that there will be no recurrence; whether any person, group or institution directly or indirectly bears responsibility in this regard; the methodology whereby restitution to any person affected by those events or their dependents or to heirs, can be effected; the institutional administrative and legislative measures which need to be taken in order to prevent any recurrence of such concerns in the future, and to promote further national unity and reconciliation among all communities. In furtherance of its mandate to report on those responsible for past events relating to the conflict, the Commission has a focus on restorative justice.

The Commission has held public sittings in Colombo as well as in the conflict affected areas and has had discussions with women as well as men. The women have expressed their views freely and there is confidence that these will certainly receive consideration in the recommendations that will be forwarded.

It is despite these unprecedented challenges that Sri Lanka has shown progress in many areas including Education, Employment and Health care of women.

Foremost among Sri Lanka’s post conflict challenges is a need to be successful in responding to the economic and social consequences, particularly in the former theater of conflict. The importance of strengthening and expanding the role of women in this response is acknowledged. An effective response is needed not merely in respect of the social legacies of increased numbers of war widows, but also women who are psychologically affected by the personal violence they suffered and witnessed. We are working on these concerns. One of the most important challenges is that of forging a common identity for our people. While there are many ongoing initiatives for reconciliation we are also working on inspiring in our people a respect for diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism. Due to matriarchal values in our society, women of our country will play an important role in this regard.

Among the issues that continue to be of concern are the following –

- The low participation of women in politics: An examination of the question as to why women are reluctant to enter politics has revealed several factors that inhibit women from participating in politics. Some of these are - the acrimonious nature of politics ("*tough and dirty nature of politics*"), the high costs involved in conducting election campaigns, the women's preoccupation with multiple roles, and the perceived lack of confidence of the political parties in the ability of women to garner votes. The above militate against women entering active politics despite concerted efforts to inspire women to enter politics through a variety of programmes.
- Violence Against Women: This continues to be a concern and is receiving the attention of the State. Legal reform to strengthen the substantive and procedural laws has been undertaken and has resulted in the enactment of very progressive laws. Sri Lanka enacted the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act and has taken several steps to improve its implementation. The substantive laws to prosecute and punish offenders are adequate but there needs to be a focus on prevention as well as effective implementation. We are working with all of the partners of the administration of justice system towards this end.
- Protection of women from violence in the former theatre of conflict: The state has taken measures to enhance law enforcement in these areas through the establishment of additional Women's and Children's Desks and the recruitment of Tamil-speaking women and men PCs. There is continued vigilance to deal with the likelihood of excesses in these areas.
- The women migrant workers: A special Ministry of Foreign Employment has been established and is mandated with the responsibility for this subject. While incidents of abuse are alarming and tragic at times, there are also many who have benefitted from overseas employment. Migrants for unskilled labour positions are trained and Employment Agencies are under greater scrutiny to ensure compliance with the protective regime that is in place in the country.
- Economic empowerment of rural women: This objective is being pursued at national level and the success of the many programmes that have been implemented, is being evaluated. In the latest programme to enhance the village economy which has been launched by the Ministry of Economic Development, there is a focus on supporting village women to engage in home based activities to enhance their economies.
- Unemployment of women: The rate of unemployment still remains higher than that of men. However the rate of reduction is encouraging. Sri Lanka hopes to see this trend continuing and a future where, with the increasing attainments in education and the provision of support services, the rate of unemployment will reduce further.

- Female headed households: The issue of female-headed households has emerged as a new priority concern consequent to the increase in numbers in the post war period. Following data collection on such families by the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs, programmes to enhance livelihood through assistance to these households are being implemented with an initial focus on conflict-affected areas. The assistance is given through Women's Societies which are village level groups registered with the Women's Bureau.

Sri Lanka reports to this Committee today with a sense of satisfaction about what has been done and with a deep sense of awareness that there is more to do. Sri Lanka is conscious that real progress of our nation will result when the women of the country are fully empowered. Even now, women are acknowledged as equal partners in implementing the country's development programme. However, our culture and tradition have ingrained in our women a sincere belief in the value of the roles played as mother and wife. The ultimate objective of all our endeavours must be to give our women an open space to make their choices that will ensure happiness and contentment in the roles chosen by them for themselves. While we believe in affording to our women the opportunity to achieve a balance in the multiple roles they choose to play as wife, mother, professional and income earner, we also believe that the value system that that has been ingrained within us, will continue to inspire us.

Our desire is not merely to pay lip service to international obligations. Our desire is to ensure real progress that will result in a happy and contented woman, empowered without discrimination but with the right to make the choices that matter to her. Sri Lanka remains firmly committed to uphold the obligations assumed under CEDAW. The Sri Lankan delegation looks forward to a constructive and interactive dialogue with you Madam Chairperson and your Committee.

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