

**Opening statement of the delegation of Sri Lanka at the 55th Session of the
Committee on the Rights of the Child, Geneva, 23 September 2010**

Madam Chairperson,

The delegation of Sri Lanka is pleased to participate in this session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child during the consideration of the Third and Fourth Periodic Report of Sri Lanka under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the initial report under its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

The participation of senior officials relevant to the promotion and protection of child rights demonstrates the commitment of the Government of Sri Lanka in fully implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as all its Optional Protocols.

Madam Chairperson,

The end of a three decade long conflict due to terrorism has created a window of opportunity for vistas for the wellbeing of all Sri Lankan children.

We can be justifiably satisfied that even during the period of the conflict, the policies and programmes of successive governments continued to uphold the best interests of children, in their survival, growth, development and protection. These policies resulted in a steady decline in under five child mortality and near universal school enrollment without gender discrimination. Provision of free health care and education, inclusive of free textbooks and uniforms continued even in the areas affected by conflict. Initiatives were also introduced for the protection of children from abuse and exploitation, which included efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labour.

Madam Chairperson,

As this Committee is aware, 70% to 80% of the fighting force of the LTTE constituted among others those who had been forcibly recruited as children, both boys and girls. Having followed a process of rehabilitation based on international norms and standards, all child combatants have now been reunited with their families and they have now resumed their normal lives including schooling and vocational training. The government has had no reports of forcible recruitments since May 2009.

Sri Lanka has cooperated and actively engaged with the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict established by the UN Security Council resolution 1612. This Working Group has welcomed the Government of Sri Lanka's zero tolerance policy regarding the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. There has also been an appreciation of the measures taken for their rehabilitation and reintegration. The Working Group also welcomed the assurances given to the Special Envoy of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and Armed Conflict (SRSG) and to the Working Group

that children formally associated with armed groups would be considered victims and not be prosecuted.

Similar assurances were also given by the Attorney-General of Sri Lanka during the interactive dialogue with the SRSJ at the on-going 15th Session of the Human Rights Council on 14th September. As the Attorney-General stated in his statement, I quote:

“The government re-iterates that in post –conflict Sri Lanka, there is no situation of child recruitment for the purpose of combat, in any part of the country. While the government is fully committed to continuing its dialogue with the office of the Special representative, UNICEF and all other UN agencies concerned with the care and protection of children, we are of the view that children in armed conflict is no longer an issue for concern. The government always understood that it was not that easy to be a child soldier. We were acutely aware that they just had to do it. We have readily rehabilitated them. We will never be afraid of these children. They will always be considered our children. We will give them all the love, care and protection to the best of our ability.” (End of quote)

Madam Chairperson,

Having emerged from a protracted armed conflict, our priorities have now shifted to providing uniform and equitable services to children throughout the country. In this regard, we are also conscious of the importance of ensuring universality and identifying issues of exclusion and injustice. We are committed to further reduce under-nutrition, and provide more life skills to our adolescents. Special children’s courts are being established and the Juvenile Justice system is in the process of being improved. Protection from abuse and exploitation has been a high priority area.

We are aware that protection issues for children are not only created by the shortcomings of State institutions, but also occur due to poverty and ignorance. The plight of children of single parent families, including the needs of widows related to the conflict, is now being addressed. Early childhood development will be further strengthened and expanded to reach out to rural areas. Reversion to normalcy in the areas affected by conflict has been given importance, as it is essential for the empowerment of children and young people in those areas to achieve reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Madam Chairperson,

Sri Lanka has consistently been conscious of the need for greater accountability in relation to the norms and standards enshrined in the Convention and its Optional Protocols. We therefore continue to work towards greater harmonization of our laws and the Convention and its Protocols. We believe that the relationship between treaty law and customary law is complicated in the context of the diversity that prevails in relation to cultural and religious practices, which have existed for generations. Nevertheless, the advocacy for change in the best interest of children continues.

We remain conscious of the need to continue to interact with relevant UN agencies and the interested members of the international community to continue to uphold child rights. In this regard, we also welcome the role of civil society organizations, NGOs and INGOs, who work within the framework of our policies, in a transparent manner.

The relationship between state authorities, civil society organizations and communities must be mutually reinforcing in the best interest of children. Sustainability of the services to children is also important.

Madam Chairperson,

Child rights require progressive interpretation through judgments and case law, which have to be imbued with international norms and cultural values of respective countries. We warmly appreciate and solicit the cooperation of the international community for the further advancement of child rights, and our collective aim should not only be to improve the conditions of the children of today, but also of those of the future generation who now have the opportunity to grow up with dignity in a peaceful Sri Lanka.

The delegation of Sri Lanka looks forward to a constructive engagement with the Committee on the Rights of the Child during the consideration of the two reports.

Thank you.

