General Debate:
Report of the High Commissioner on Sri Lanka
Delivered by Renate Bloem
25 September 2013

Thank you Mr President

CIVICUS thanks the High Commissioner for her oral update on Sri Lanka and is appalled about ongoing egregious human rights abuses. We are also shocked about the insulting attitude towards her during her visit on behalf of various media, bloggers and even Ministers. We deplore the lack of protection for human rights defenders in general and strongly condemn reprisal actions towards those who met or wished to meet with her. Some such reported cases include that of a man, a war victim from the North-Eastern Mullaitivu district, who was subsequently threatened with physical harm by intelligence officials and a 63-year old Christian priest who was questioned by police officers for hours regarding his meeting with the High Commissioner.

Attacks on journalists and the clamp down on freedom of expression continue. The Sri Lanka Working Journalists’ Association has requested a report from the Sri Lanka NHRC on progress or lack of progress of police investigations into attacks on and deaths of more than 30 journalists.

CIVICUS also shares the concern about disproportional militarization, particular in regions inhabited by the Tamil minority. Large tracts of land have been taken from private citizens in the Northern and Eastern provinces which makes the already complex land issue even more difficult to resolve. The military’s unwarrant influence over vulnerable civilian lives with even three deaths occurring over just demanding safe drinking water gives rise to highest concern. Military involvements in investigating their own wrongdoings is even more worrisome and the illegal impeachment of the Chief Justice in January has lead to a continuing constitutional crisis. We therefore reiterate the High Commissioner’s remarks: “Sri Lanka is showing signs of heading in an increasingly authoritarian direction”.

With others we urge the Council to call on the Sri Lankan Government to:

- Restore Constitutional provisions that guarantee the separation of powers
- Restore the independence of government institutions, including the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka
- Institute effective mechanisms to protect journalists, civil society groups and human rights defenders
- Allow full and credible international investigations into all allegations concerning violations of international humanitarian law in the country

In conclusion CIVICUS pays tribute to a friend, late Sunila Abeysekera, who fought and contributed so greatly to human rights and justice in Sri Lanka.

I thank you