

Civil society condemns attacks on HRCSL chief

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Thirty-seven civil society organisations and 170 individuals yesterday released a statement condemning the threats against Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka Chairperson Dr. Deepika Udagama.

Given below is the full statement:

We are appalled at statements akin to death threats, violence and hate speech against the Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL), Dr. Deepika Udagama, a highly respected scholar and human rights advocate. We express grave concern and alarm at these statements and extend our solidarity and support to Dr. Udagama.

We take this opportunity to welcome the independent, substantive and transparent policy interventions made by the HRCSL under Dr. Udagama's leadership. We also welcome the Commission's proactive investigations into individual cases and the consultative processes and mechanisms it has put in place including with government and non-government entities. Among the Commission's work has been the independent vetting process undertaken in relation to the deployment of military personnel for UN peacekeeping operations, which has led to these recent threats. We reiterate that this is part of the mandate of the HRCSL and applaud its commitment to continue despite threats. We welcome the HRCSL's transparency in clarifying the process of this work in response to misleading and false information published by some media.

The threats against Dr. Udagama as chairperson of the HRCSL, made by Rear Admiral (Rtd.) Sarath Weerasekera, former Director General of the Civil Defence Force, at a media briefing called by the "Jathika Sanvidana Ekatuwa" and published in

“Mawbima” a weekly Sinhala language newspaper, on 29 June 2018, are directly linked to the HRCSL’s role in this vetting process, undertaken at the request of the Government of Sri Lanka and with the agreement of the Sri Lanka Army. Dr. Udagama was also accused of working with NGOs to treacherously further the interests of the Tigers, and Rear Admiral Weerasekera called for the death penalty for all traitors under the rule of a patriotic Government.

The nature of the attack against Dr. Udagama is of course nothing new. Rear Admiral Weerasekera and others like him routinely seek to discredit, delegitimise and dismiss opinions and actions of those that they are not in agreement with as the work of “NGOs, tiger terrorists and unpatriotic elements” without engaging in reasoned and rational debate. The mainstream media simply reproduces these statements without any analysis or investigation of what is being said.

The current leadership of the HRCSL has time and again demonstrated its independence from the State and private entities. We wish to stress that the Commissioners of the HRCSL were selected by the Constitutional Council, established by popular demand, through the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka in 2015. It is the diligence and good practice established by the current leadership that resulted in the HRCSL being reinstated to an institution with “A” status under the Paris Principles of 1993, which frame and guide the work of National Human Rights Institutions across the world. We welcome this recognition as another indicator of the institutional integrity re-established by the HRCSL under the leadership of Dr. Udagama.

That the HRCSL Chairperson should be threatened publicly in such a manner, and that the Mawbima newspaper chose to highlight such irresponsible statements is a matter of serious concern. We condemn these statements and the impunity with which they are made. We call on the President, the Prime Minister and all political leaders to publicly express their confidence in the Chairperson and HRCSL, ensure her protection and that of the other Commissioners and Staff of HRCSL, and enable a safe environment conducive to the work of the HRCSL being carried out without interference, threat or compromise.



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