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Statement on the Presidential Task Forces

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June 15th 2020, Colombo, Sri Lanka:

We, the undersigned from civil society express grave concern regarding the establishment of a spate of Presidential Task Forces in the last few months.

Three Task Forces were appointed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa as a response to COVID-19. One has extensive powers to direct, coordinate and monitor the delivery of continuous services for the sustenance of overall community life, another relates to Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication and one concerns Sri Lanka's Education Affairs. Two most recently created are the Presidential Task Force to build a Secure Country, Disciplined, Virtuous and Lawful Society (established by Gazette Extraordinary no. 2178/18) and the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province (established by Gazette Extraordinary no. 2178/17), both dated 2nd June 2020.

These Task Forces are established with broad, ambiguous mandates, bypassing existing channels such as the Department of Archaeology, and at a time when there is no sitting Parliament that can exercise oversight in respect of their functions and the exercise of their powers. Furthermore, they were appointed at a time when the country was under a lock down due to the COVID -19 pandemic and citizens were unable to make inputs to express their concerns regarding their establishment. The exercise of extraordinary power during a crisis should be supported by strong reasons. Why matters such as archaeology and heritage were prioritised amidst an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis is cause for concern.

All the Presidential Task Forces have a compliment of military personnel while the Presidential Task Force to build a Secure Country, Disciplined, Virtuous and Lawful Society is composed entirely of persons from the armed forces and police. This further demonstrates the steady drift towards militarizing civil functions within Sri Lanka's health and educational sectors, development, public administration and even judicial processes following the Presidential election of November 2019. This does not bode well for Sri Lanka's long-established parliamentary democracy.

The members of the Task Forces are drawn almost entirely from the Sinhala community. Buddhist monks make up a significant portion of the Task Force for the Eastern Province, ignoring the fact that the Province is also equally populated by Tamils and Muslims. It is likely that the interests of these communities will be neglected by the Task Forces and will reflect the majoritarianism espoused by this government.

Sri Lanka's democratic mechanisms must be made to work efficiently without politicization or resort to militarization. These new Task Forces are structures that are solely accountable to the President and are staffed, not by professional civil service personnel, with the required experience, but by security personnel

with no experience in civil functions. They are expected to ‘police’ the civil service and are usurping the powers and functions of the Cabinet and Ministries, which are vital in a parliamentary democracy. Rather than these Task Forces, the Sectoral Oversight Committee system in Parliament established under the 19th Amendment and populated by Members of Parliament from all political parties is a much more independent and efficient oversight mechanism that can respond to the exigencies faced by the country at this time. It is also unclear how the work of these task forces will be financed, to what extent they will duplicate functions of ministries, and the extra costs and expenditures that this will entail at a time when the need for cost cutting should be a primary concern of the government.

In the context of the pandemic, Sri Lanka is at the crossroads with its economy shattered and it is vital that we build confidence – both nationally and internationally – that the country will adopt rational and inclusive policies and approaches, that are transparent and credible responses to this crisis. The crisis is not an excuse for militarization and militarization is not the solution to the challenges of this crisis management. Nor is it the solution to bypass the Prime Minister and the cabinet of ministers, and the Parliament in a functioning democracy.

Signatures

Individuals

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5. Anthony Vinoth
6. Anushya Coomaraswamy
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Organizations

1. Australian Advocacy for Good Governance of Sri Lanka
2. Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)
3. Centre for Policy Alternatives
4. Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners
5. Families of the Disappeared
6. International Centre for Ethnic Studies
7. Law and Society Trust
8. People for Human Rights and Equality
9. Right to Life Human Rights Centre
10. Rights Now- Collective for Democracy
11. Transparency International Sri Lanka
12. Viluthu
13. Women and Media Collective
14. Women Development Innovators
15. Women's Action Network

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