

**Arrangements Sri Lanka has made to preserve the rights of minorities
to education in relation to content and delivery of the curriculum**

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Madam Chairperson,
Madam Independent Expert on Minority Issues,
Distinguish experts, delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, let me thank the Independent Expert on Minority Issues and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for inviting me to address this Forum, as the Director General of Sri Lanka's National Institute of Education.

Sri Lanka welcomes the draft recommendations of this Forum since they embody principles that in general Sri Lanka has followed over the years. We continue to maintain our services to all our citizens, including not just free education but even the provision of free school uniforms and books in each language medium, even to those in areas temporarily not in government control.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society of about 20 million people of whom nearly a quarter are from minority communities, mainly Tamil and Muslim. The Constitution of Sri Lanka provides for 'the complete eradication of illiteracy and the assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal education at all levels'. The provision of education to all our children is thus a national priority.

In Sri Lanka just over a quarter of school children belong to minority groups while nearly 30% of schools cater to students pursuing studies in the Tamil medium. Almost 23% of teachers are trained in Tamil medium. Regulations adopted in 1997 ensure compulsory education to all children between Grades 1 to 9, while we hope to raise the compulsory education level up to Grade 11, ie 16 years.

Despite problems caused by terrorism, the government has ensured that the education of children in conflict-affected areas, including the conduct of national exams, continues without interruption. The examination for the General Certificate of Education is even now being conducted for displaced children. In addition education for children displaced by conflict is ensured by facilitating admission to schools near long term and even temporary welfare centres.

Moreover University education is free in Sri Lanka, and brings students of all communities together, not only in the many faculties where the medium of instruction is English but also in those universities where classes are conducted for students in more than one medium of instruction.

The right to education in mother tongue, Sinhala or Tamil, was introduced over 60 years ago in primary schools nationwide, and indeed mother tongue education continues compulsory at that level, with the option of English having been reintroduced at secondary level a few years back.

Citizenship education includes the values of pluralism, and the distinct contribution of all communities to the rich tapestry that makes up the multi ethnic and multi-cultural fabric of Sri Lankan society.

Sri Lanka has a central curriculum supervised by the Ministry of Education. Preparation of the school curriculum is the responsibility of the National Institute of Education according to guidelines laid down by the National Education Commission. The National Institute of Education identifies expert groups of teachers and academics from the school and university systems and from other stakeholders, ensuring minority representation at all levels. All curriculum material and teacher instruction manuals are prepared in all three languages, Tamil, Sinhala and English.

Pre-service teacher training is conducted by the National Colleges of Education. There are 17 such colleges in the country out of which 6 colleges are devoted to Tamil medium teachers. There are three other Colleges offering both Sinhala and Tamil medium teacher training.

In 1998 a compulsory second national language programme was implemented from primary school to improve Tamil language competency in Sinhala medium students and Sinhala language competency in Tamil students, so as to enhance social cohesion and integration. Teachers for this programme are trained by the National Colleges of Education.

Another progressive measure that has already been implemented is the establishment of an open school at the National Institute of Education to cater to children deprived of education in the regular system due to various reasons.

The Ministry of Education has also introduced a Peace Education Policy, to promote harmony among school children belong to all ethnic groups. One of the main activities within this framework is to organize camps where children of all ethnic communities come together to spend 1 to 2 weeks, engaging in

activities which promote peace and social harmony. Sports activities that develop interaction between students of different backgrounds are also encouraged.

In conclusion Madam Chair, we support the recommendations made under Chapter VII of the draft, whilst, on the basis of our own national experience, I would also propose several additional recommendations such as:

- Implementation of second national language programmes, as appropriate,
- Establishment of open education opportunities to provide for vulnerable groups including minorities,
- Educational exchange programmes among children who belong to all communities in order to promote understanding and ethnic and cultural harmony in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies.

Despite the conflict situation and the fight against terrorism in Sri Lanka, providing education to all children, irrespective of their ethnic or cultural identities, is one of our greatest achievements. This policy has continued, and will continue, to maintain Sri Lanka's high position in Human Development indices.

Thank you madam Chairperson