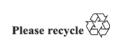**General Assembly**

Human Rights Council
Forty-ninth session
28 February–1 April 2022
Agenda item 2
Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Written statement* submitted by African Green Foundation International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[6 February 2022]

---

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.

Please recycle

Reconciliation and National Security; Striking the Right Balance

Introduction:

Ethnic and religious resurgence is an apex global challenge. With over 12,000 ethnic and religious communities living in 195 countries, maintaining ethnic and religious harmony is a global imperative. However, only a few countries and a few leaders have mastered the science and art of managing ethnic and religious diversity.

Unless political leaders and bureaucrats learn to manage the ethnic and religious space, many countries will suffer from ethnic and religious violence. Governments should regulate ethnic and religious ideologies calling for separation. Instead, governments should support integration. If not ethnic and religious exclusivism will evolve into extremism and extremism to terrorism and violence. Sri Lanka is not an exception to this global trend.

Ethnicity and religiosity are powerful and emotive tools. Multiethnic and multireligious societies are vulnerable to political manipulation. The ethnic and religious communities are used, misused and abused by power-hungry politicians either to sustain or capture political power. Ethnic and religious entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka have exploited and continue to exploit ethnicity and religiosity to attain their personal and political goals. Unlike in Singapore, there is no legal and policy framework in Sri Lanka to prevent and deter unscrupulous politicians from harnessing ethnicity and religiosity to advance their narrow political aims. If Sri Lankan leaders wish stability and peace for the next generation of Sri Lankans, they should create a Harmony Act to manage the ethnic and religious space.

The Context:

Sri Lankan security forces defeated the world's first insurgent and terrorist campaign of the 21st century. Neither in Afghanistan nor in Iraq, the United States of America-led western forces could restore security and stability.

Since the end of the 30-year conflict, the Sri Lankan threat landscape has become complex. After the conflict between the globally designated terrorist entity, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan state ended, the threat environment has become diverse. Although the threat of terrorism diminished, a multiplicity of threats today challenge the national security community. In addition to ethnic separatism, religious extremism challenges Sri Lankan unity. Political ideologies in the guise of religion continues to damage the fabric of Sri Lankan society. The high point of Muslim radicalisation was the Easter Sunday attack, followed by anti-Muslim incidents. With the return of the Taliban - al Qaeda alliance to Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, the threat of radicalisation to the region including Sri Lanka has increased.

Background:

Ancient Sri Lanka was renowned as a paradise both for its physical attractiveness and the hospitality of its inhabitants. The foundation of Sri Lankan culture was from Buddhism. Moderation, toleration and kindness created the environment for all ethnic and religious communities to live in amity without harming and hurting each other. For two and half millennia, Christians, Hindus and Muslims served in the successive Sinhala-Buddhist kingdoms from Anuradhapura to Kandy.

The central Buddhist concept of compassion became the hallmark of the lifestyle of the ethnic and religious mosaic. They respected each other's cultures - ethnicities and religions. From Arab travellers to Muslim poets recollected the spirit of friendship to all and enmity to none.

After Independence on February 4, 1948, the founding fathers believed in the Ceylonese ideal. During British rule, the Tamils enjoyed disproportionate access to education and employment. Emerging out of the divide and rule policy of the British, Sri Lankan leaders at a political

level tried to correct the imbalance. This caused the relations between the Sinhalese and Tamils and Tamils and the State to suffer. Rather than promoting the Ceylonese identity as the national identity, a few communal leaders promoted their own ethnic identities. Segments of Sinhalese leaders promoted the Sinhala identity, the Tamil leaders, the Tamil identity, and the Muslim leaders, the Muslim identity. The separation of the communities created the space for extremist ideologies from Tamil Nadu to take root. A decade after, communal politics started to polarise the communities paving the way for intermittent ethnic violence. The national leaders failed to manage Tamil politics influenced by the call for a Dravidastan in India cascading to Sri Lanka. Starting with the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, the Tamil separatist ideal gathered momentum. The discord led to an ethnic issue and when it was not resolved, into an ethnic conflict. Rather than create a Sinhala Only Act, SWRD Bandaranaike should have managed the ethnic relations. The then government should have diffused the communal tension and prevented its escalation. The leadership of the Tamil United Front and later the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) covertly supported the New Tamil Tigers and its successor the LTTE. Compounded by Tamil Nadu political support, the separatist movement gathered momentum precipitating a terrorist campaign. The LTTE attack on the Sri Lankan military patrol killing 13 soldiers and an officer culminated in the ethnic riots of July 1983. With the relationship between Colombo and Delhi deteriorating, the Indian government steadfastly supported six Tamil groups to wage a terrorist campaign. The violence from 1983-2009 resulted in prejudice, suspicion, resentment, anger and hatred. Although the Sri Lankan conflict has ended, the Tamil political parties - Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) - have not abandoned their vision of separatism. To prevent the return of conflict and to strengthen unity among all communities, both government and partners lack a strategy. To secure the next generation from radicalisation, the government should work together and work hard with community partners to restore trust with all communities. To transit from a culture of violence to a culture of harmony, the ideal of separatism should be replaced by the idea of coexistence. Neglecting TNA and TNPF promotion of separatism will result in Tamil radicalisation. Radicalisation will result in reciprocal radicalisation culminating in violence, causing suffering for all communities. The Sri Lankan government will have to think and act rationally and work with all communities. To restore harmony, it is paramount to develop a zero tolerance against ethnic separatism. It is even more important to build bridges between north and south in all the sectors of growth and development.

State Response:

To rise to the challenge of multiple challenges, the government is establishing a range of capabilities. The government formed a State Ministry of National Security and Disaster Management and the Ministry of Public Security in 2020. Institute of National Security Studies, the premier think tank established under the aegis of the Ministry of Defence, supports the Sri Lankan government by providing sound and timely threat assessments and policy recommendations to address the spectrum of threats. With the goal of safeguarding the nation from internal and external threats, we identify gaps, loopholes and weaknesses in national security. By working within and outside government to mitigate and respond to these threats, we recommend policies, share best practices, and build capacity through training. To strengthen Sri Lankan national security, we train national security professionals and widen the national security community to include the private sector security industry.

Conclusion:

Three decades of terrorism harnessing ethnic divisions crippled Sri Lanka's economy and social structure. The end of conflict May 2009 has given Sri Lankans a ray of hope and opportunity to embrace peace and pursue prosperity. However, a decade of peace was shattered by the Easter Sunday attack on religious and commercial targets by a religious extremist group in 2019. The Easter attack reminds the nation that the threats are not only continuing but also expanding into new areas, like transnational terrorism. Both the separatist terrorists and religious fundamentalists have links beyond the territory, making them cross border and transnational threats to Sri Lanka's security. In the changing security context of

Sri Lanka, we can foresee a range of threats including ethnic separatism and religious extremism being significant security threats in the future.

National security is a top priority in the National Policy Framework "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour". Without jeopardizing the democratic space open to all Sri Lankans, the commitment to national security should remain unequivocal. New approaches and strategies need to be implemented to protect and advance national security. To address the apex challenges to Sri Lanka's changing security landscape, it is vital to mobilise the rich resource pool of security analysts and practitioners both within and outside the government. The best and brightest should be encouraged to staff the Sri Lankan national security community to navigate through current and emerging challenges and to secure Sri Lanka.

———————

London Initiative, Global Srilankan Forum UK, GSLF Excom, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.