

# NGO FORUM ON SRI LANKA: ANNUAL CONSULTATION:

## Chronology of Events

### Background

The NGO Forum on Sri Lanka is comprised of NGOs based in Sri Lanka and abroad, who collaborate in various programmes in the three main areas of relief, development and human rights and in peace, as a necessary condition for their work. The Co-Chairs of the Forum are Richard Reoch of the UK and Charles Abeysekera of Sri Lanka.

A perusal of the membership list of the NGO Forum will clearly indicate that the persons involved are not in any way linked to anti-government or pro-LTTE activity. Indeed, many of them have faced criticism because they have taken pro-government and anti-LTTE stances.

### Plans for the Consultation

Each year, the NGO Forum has a Consultation of its members to review on-going work and plan future programmes. Last year, the Consultation was held in London, with the participation of about 25 Sri Lankans. At that meeting, it was decided that the next Consultation would be held in Sri Lanka to enable the participation of more Sri Lankans. The change in government also led the Forum to believe that it would be important to express its solidarity with the processes set in motion by the PA government to reaffirm democratic values and respect for human rights in Sri Lanka.

The dates of the meeting were set for November 15 and 16 1995 at a planning meeting held in March 1995. Background documents were prepared and circulated among the over 80 participants (21 foreign and 61 local) who had expressed a wish to participate in this Consultation.

### Informing the Government

The Foreign Ministry was informed of this meeting by a letter dated October 19, 1995 and relevant papers on the meeting were supplied. The Forum received no response and was never informed of any additional procedure that should be followed. Accordingly, by November 13, all arrangements were in motion. That same evening the Foreign Ministry sought clarification from the UK High Commission and the Forum about the letter sent to it by "Sri Lanka Expatriates Association in UK". At this stage the

Foreign Ministry was given further details and the misrepresentations in that letter were corrected. The Foreign Ministry gave no indication whatsoever that there was any reason not to proceed with the meeting.

### Misinformation and Attacks

On the 14th morning, daily newspapers carried news items claiming that a meeting aimed at urging the government to call off Operation Riviresa was to be held in Bentota. This news was repeated over the state television and radio news broadcasts and on other FM radio broadcasts. From morning, a crowd gathered outside the Bentota Beach Hotel where the meeting was due to be held. When informed of this development, the Foreign Ministry assured the organisers of the Forum that the meeting could go ahead and said that instructions had been given for a commando unit to be dispatched to the site so that the meeting could proceed "in tranquility".

However, during the course of the morning the SP, Bentota, maintained that the situation was beyond his control, and the hotel management regretfully withdrew their facilities. Under these circumstances, the Forum decided to relocate the meeting in Colombo as it did not want any unpleasant incidents to mar the purpose of the meeting, which is to discuss peace and human rights in Sri Lanka. Up to this point the NGO Forum had not received any intimation from any official source that this meeting should not be held.

It was also on this day that the mob in Bentota physically attacked three Sri Lankan journalists and two foreign participants of the Forum, causing bodily injuries and seriously damaging the vehicle in which they were travelling.

### Contacting the Government and Conducting the Meeting

On the 15th, the Chair of the Forum wrote to the Foreign Ministry thanking the government for its support, reconfirmed the nature of the meeting and advised it that the meeting would be proceeding.

In the meanwhile, also on the 15th, thinking to take advantage of the presence of a large number of Forum members in Colombo, informal consultations took place according to the framework of which the government had been informed. This was especially important since not only had some members travelled from Europe and the US to be here for the meeting, but others had traveled from outstation areas including Badulla, Tricomalee and Hatton. It was also felt necessary to reassure the participants that a democratic atmosphere continued to prevail in this country, in which an internal consultation of this nature could take place free of hindrance.

Throughout the day of the 15th, the officers of Mr. Abeysekera received threatening telephone calls. An official complaint was lodged at the Narahenpita Police Station. This situation continued through the 16th.

On the morning of the 16th, about 40 members of the Forum had gathered at the Kamkaru Sevana in Ratmalana for a final discussion prior to dispersal. Officers from the Mount Lavinia Police came to these premises and Mr. Abeysekera and Mr. Wolf, the Forum Secretary, were invited to the Police Station to clarify matters. The Police raised two matters: first under Emergency Regulations, any meeting required official permission, even a meeting of invited persons within a room which could be classified as a 'congregation', secondly there was a question of security in that there was a threat that some groups might try to disrupt the meeting. The Police allowed Mr. Abeysekera to telephone the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but it was not possible to get any clarification immediately. In the circumstances the Police requested that the meeting be suspended pending clarification.

Mr. Abeysekera then returned to the meeting and conveyed the Police request to the group. Then the meeting was adjourned, with participants remaining on the premises.

At this stage, a picket of about 25 to 30 persons with anti-NGO placards appeared at the entrance to the meeting venue. The police prevented them from entering the premises but then began to pressurise the participants to leave the building on the ground that a threat to their security could develop, which they might not be able to handle. The organisers then decided that the meeting would disperse.

An FM radio station reported the incidents at Ratmalana and then gave out the address of one of the hotels at which both foreign and Sri Lankan participants were staying. Soon after, the hotel was besieged by the same protest crowd who invaded the premises, trying unsuccessfully to get hold of Forum participants. The same

radio station then gave out the address of a Sri Lankan Human Rights organization, INFORM, and a further incident began to develop there.

At this point two government ministers, a deputy minister and a Member of Parliament came to the site. They conveyed their deep concern about what had happened and discussed the entire situation with members of the Forum. A reception for the Forum was spontaneously arranged by one of the ministers and the Prime Minister sent a personal representative to convey her apologies for what had happened.

## Responsibility of Government and MPs

**T**he Forum has strongly urged the Government and Members of Parliament to intervene in this matter and ensure that this incident will not lead to any further repercussions on either the organisers or members of the NGO Forum or on the good name of the government of Sri Lanka.

The Chair of the Forum expressed his appreciation of the gestures made by the government on the evening of the 16th. However, he stressed that fact that there remained at least three immediate and profoundly disturbing consequences which were the responsibility of government to resolve publicly and effectively:

1. At a time of great volatility in the life of the nation, a mob had besieged and prevented a non-violent private meeting from taking place, intimidated its participants and inflicted injuries and damage. The police, army and government had been unable to intervene effectively to stop this. This was a deeply worrying signal at this time.
2. The national news media had repeatedly printed and broadcast totally inaccurate and defamatory information in the full knowledge that it was false and would inflame the situation. This had been done despite being provided with correct information by the Forum and direct contact with senior executives in all the major media.
3. The population had been given the impression that the NGO community working in the best interests of Sri Lanka, both in the country and abroad, was anti-government and, worse, pro-terrorist. This had sent shock waves through the entire NGO community and could have grave consequences both within Sri Lanka and abroad. It's a stigma that must urgently and publicly be removed.

**Charles Abeysekera**  
**Richard Reoch**  
Chairpersons of the  
Annual Consultation