



COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS CONTINUES GENERAL DEBATE ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

31 March 2005

WANNAKUWATTEWADUGE FERNANDO (Sri Lanka) said that after the tsunami disaster of 26 December 2004, the Government had received unprecedented assistance and solidarity from other Governments, United Nations and international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the public from all over the world. Sri Lanka was most grateful for that assistance. The Government held that all groups engaged in relief efforts in the country did so for purely humanitarian purposes, and that such aid was not conditional, nor intended to create religious disharmony. Therefore, it was preposterous for the non-governmental organization Becket Fund to suggest that legislation was being prepared to jail faith-based aid workers from carrying out purely humanitarian missions.

Perhaps the Becket Fund was referring to a private member's bill on unethical conversions, which had been turned down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional last year. As in any democracy, a private member could bring a bill to Parliament, and there was an opportunity to question any provision therein, and to challenge it in the Supreme Court, as had been done on numerous occasions by political parties, trade unions, civil society organizations and even individuals.

As for the concern expressed that, if not for faith-based organizations, the children of Sri Lanka might not have a home, a dose of medicine or a meal, the Becket Fund should read Sri Lanka's statement under item 10 of the agenda, and recall that, since independence, the Government had provided free education and health services to all citizens without discrimination. This was confirmed by the country's high standing on the UNDP Human Development Index.

It was disappointing that an non-governmental organization, which proclaimed to stand for religious liberty, had chosen to use this forum to cast aspersions on an ancient religion that preached tolerance and was followed by millions around the world.