

UN rights expert warns torture routinely used against Sri Lankan security suspects

18 July 2017 – Concluding a five-day visit to Sri Lanka, a United Nations independent human right expert today noted “routine and endemic” use of torture against people detained on national security grounds.

“The Tamil community has borne the brunt of the State’s well-oiled torture apparatus,” said Ben Emmerson, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism, adding that the law is used disproportionately against the minority group.

During his visit between 10 and 14 July to assess the progress Sri Lanka has achieved in its law, policies and practice in the fight against terrorism since the end of its internal armed conflict, Mr. Emmerson heard first-hand accounts of brutal torture.

“These included beatings with sticks, stress positions, asphyxiation using plastic bags drenched in kerosene, pulling out of fingernails, insertion of needles beneath the fingernails, various forms of water torture, suspension for several hours by the thumbs, and mutilation of the genitals.”

Mr. Emmerson said 80 per cent of all suspects arrested under the anti-terror legislation in late 2016 had reported torture and other physical ill-treatment.

The expert specifically pointed to the situation of a dozen prisoners who have been detained without trial for more than 10 years under the anti-terror act, and 70 others for more than five years.

“These staggering figures are a stain on Sri Lanka’s reputation,” the expert noted, urging immediate release of the 81 suspects and announcing a dialogue with the government on the shape of proposed draft legislation which is due to replace the act.

Although recognizing that Sri Lanka had faced “tremendous security challenges” in recent years, the expert emphasized that progress towards reform, justice and human rights was at a “virtual standstill” despite Government promises.

The Special Rapporteur did welcome small signs of progress, but said failing to deliver justice and reform risked prolonging grievances and even reigniting the conflict.

“The Government has committed itself to ending the culture of impunity, ensuring accountability, peace and justice, achieving lasting reconciliation and preventing further human rights abuses” he said, pointing to the steps set out in a Human Rights Council resolution.

A comprehensive report with his findings and recommendations based on the experts visit will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.