



Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka

PRESS RELEASE

Regarding the Human Rights Vetting Process of Contingents Deployed on UN Peacekeeping Missions

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka expresses its disappointment about the publishing of false information in the past through various media outlets, in response to which the Commission has had to rebut inaccurate news reports on several occasions. The citizens of Sri Lanka are entitled to receive true and accurate information and in order to avoid the potential negative view that could be held by the general public regarding the functions of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL), the Commission aims to place on record accurate information regarding the vetting process.

1. Upon an agreement between the government of Sri Lanka and the United Nations on 15 June 2016, a discussion was held with the Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Secretary of the Ministry of Defence and senior officials of the Sri Lanka Army and the Department of Police. The need for HRCSL to conduct a human rights clearance process for Sri Lankan Security forces, prior to their deployment to UN Peacekeeping operations, was highlighted, and on the 28 June 2016, the Commission agreed to conduct the vetting process.
2. It was stated that the United Nations is entrusting the vetting process to a national entity for the first time, and the HRCSL was assigned this responsibility because of its commitment to maintaining its status as an independent institution. Hence, the Commission agreed to execute the vetting process, despite the fact it is outside the direct mandate of the Commission.

Accordingly, on 2 February 2017, the Sri Lanka Army handed over relevant documents of 200 army personnel who wished to be deployed for the UN Peacekeeping mission in Mali, to the HRCSL. However, while the Commission was in the process of conducting the vetting of 200 troops, members of the Sri Lanka Army informed the Commission that they

had already received clearance from United Nations ahead of the Commission's clearance. Due to the resultant confusion, the Commission in writing informed the parties concerned that the vetting process was halted. Later, the vetting process was resumed on 6 November 2017, following a discussion with the Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, Secretary of the Ministry of Law and Order, Commanders of the Tri-forces and the Inspector General of Police with the Commission, initiated by the then Hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs.

3. Subsequently, 204 applications of military personnel to be deployed in Lebanon for Peacekeeping operations were received by the Commission on 21 December 2017 from the Sri Lanka Army. However, the vetting process was halted once again, after due notice was given to both parties because a contingent constituting 49 military personnel who had not obtained clearance from the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka were deployed to UN Peacekeeping operations in Lebanon, on 19 February 2018, while the vetting process was still underway.
4. At the request of the Commission, the UNDPKO initiated a round table discussion in Colombo in June 2018, to resolve the complex situation, and address the failure on the part of relevant stakeholders to provide adequate information and guidelines to conduct an efficient vetting process. At this discussion, all stakeholders (the Tri-forces, Police, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, HRCSL and the UNDPKO) unanimously agreed to withhold the vetting process until a Standard Operations Procedure (SOP) was formulated. Once the resultant procedure was agreed upon by all the stakeholders, on the 20 of December 2018 (i.e. after six months), the UNDPKO informed all relevant stakeholders that the vetting process can be resumed. The threshold for the vetting process was unanimously agreed upon and is currently being utilized, with the cooperation of all stakeholders.

Further, UNDPKO issued a priority list comprising 9 groups to all concerned parties on 7 January 2019, and the Commission was asked to prioritize only these 9 groups when conducting the vetting process. In addition, by a letter dated 2 March 2019, the UNDPKO informed all parties concerned that the deployment timeline for the battalions on the priority list may be subject to change.

5. It was also agreed at the roundtable discussion that, in order to expedite the vetting process, the lists of personnel from the military troops shall be vetted by HRCSL in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights also informed the Commission that each and every troop member must be cleared by both entities. Although Commission expressed that a double vetting process may cause delays, the double vetting process was agreed upon by all the parties present at the meeting on 30 January 2019, which was chaired by the Hon. Speaker. This process is currently being implemented and the final arbiter of this vetting process is the United Nations.

6. It must be clearly emphasized that a considerable amount of time and resources are expended by the Commission in executing the vetting process, and great attention to detail is paid during the procedure, in order to ensure the integrity of this process and render justice to all troops. It should also be noted that the failure of the Commission to uphold the credibility of the vetting process would risk jeopardizing the opportunity granted to Sri Lanka to participate in UN Peacekeeping Operations.
7. Simultaneously, a discussion was held among the Army Commander, representatives of the UN, members of the Police Department, Sri Lanka Air Force and the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka on 25 March 2019, during which the current progress of the vetting process and the subsequent steps to be followed were discussed. Furthermore, following a discussion regarding the false media reports published about the Commission, the Army Commander stated that reliable information on the vetting of military personnel can only be obtained from the Army Commander and the media unit of the Sri Lanka Army, and therefore any other information extracted from other personnel or sources would not be true or accurate. A media release to this effect was issued by the Army Commander on 27 March 2019.
8. At a meeting held on 20 June 2019 with all relevant parties, chaired by His Excellency the President, the current status of the vetting process was informed to all those present.
9. All stakeholders are aware of the facts pertaining to this matter, and following the issuance of vetting results for the priority lists of 9 groups, 632 officers from 6 groups have been deployed for Peacekeeping Missions. The Commission denounces the false reports issued by several media outlets, despite all relevant entities being aware of the facts associated with the process of vetting. False reporting creates a negative perception of the Commission in the public view, thereby misleading the citizens of Sri Lanka. As the government of Sri Lanka has taken the responsibility of adhering to an important international commitment, the sincere cooperation of all parties involved is valued.

Dr. Deepika Udagama
Chairperson
Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka