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Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Hussein, at the end of his mission to Sri Lanka

Colombo, 9 February 2016

Good afternoon, and thank you for coming.

I come to you shortly after wrapping up my visit here with meetings with President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the Leader of the Opposition. I discussed a wide range of issues that will have an important bearing on the future. On my arriving here on Saturday, I have also met the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice and Prison Reforms, Rehabilitation and Resettlement, as well as the Defence Secretary, Defence Staff, Army and Air Force Commanders and the Chief of Staff of the Navy.

In addition, here in Colombo, I visited the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka that will lead the forthcoming National Consultations on transitional justice. I also met some of Lanka's finest thinkers and analysts, including members of its vibrant civil society.

On Sunday, I visited the Northern and Eastern Provinces, where I met the Chief Ministers and members of the Provincial Councils as well as the Governors, and yesterday morning I went to visit the revered Sri Dalada Maligawa, or Temple of the Sacred Tooth in Kandy. I was graciously received by the Mahanayakas (Chief Monks) of the Malwatte and Asgiriya, and I was very grateful to them for according me this great privilege, as well as to the members of the Muslim and Christian communities I met in Colombo, Jaffna and Trincomalee.

This has been a much more friendly, cooperative and encouraging visit than the one I endured in August 2013, which as you may recall was marred by vituperative attacks simply because she addressed a number of burning human rights issues that are of concern for Human Rights would have raised at that time.

I am aware that some of the same people have given me a similar welcome — I know that — but I am pleased that in the new environment in Sri Lanka, all voices, including those of civil society, can at last be heard, even if sometimes the voices of hatred and bigotry are the loudest, and as a result are perhaps being listened to more than they deserve.

Sri Lanka has come a long way in the past year, as you, the media, are only too aware of. The much greater freedom you now have to write what you wish to write, and report on what you should report. The element of fear has considerably diminished, at least in Colombo. In the North and the East, it has mutated but, sadly, still exists.

Virtually everyone agrees there has been progress, although opinions differ markedly on the extent of that progress. The 'white van' abductions that operated outside all norms of international law as intended — instilled fear in the hearts of journalists, human rights defenders and others who criticise the Government or State security institutions, are now very seldom reported. Torture complaints have been reduced but new cases continue to emerge — as television news detailing some disturbing alleged cases that occurred in 2015, have shown — and the military continue to resort to violence and excessive force.

Several recent highly symbolic steps have been taken that have had a positive impact on communal relations, including the decision taken to sing the national anthem in

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