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Dear Dany,

Thank you for your message, together with a letter to Ed Mortimer, received yesterday explaining the reasoning behind your decision to withdraw invitations to two Sri Lanka NGOs, on the insistence of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence, to attend the upcoming conference in Bangkok, entitled 'Enhancing Human Rights and Security in the Asia Pacific.'

As I mentioned in my brief response last night, Amnesty International has considered the points you have raised in favour of continued engagement but no longer considers it appropriate to participate in the conference. Accordingly, with regret, we are withdrawing our two delegates.

While we understand that the philosophy of the project is to engage with security sector organisations to promote change from within, in our view this cannot be achieved without civil society engagement. The aggressive approach of the Ministry of Defence of Sri Lanka in demanding the withdrawal of Sri Lankan NGOs (all initially, two after negotiation) should not have been acceded to; it would have been far preferable to stand firm as organizers and to have taken a principled inclusive approach. If Sri Lanka chose to withdraw, you would have done the project less harm in the long run. Moreover, allowing such aggressive tactics to prevail undermines civil society. We were also concerned to see a message to NGO participants suggesting that they moderate their remarks at the conference about the Sri Lankan security forces to avoid a walk-out. As an organization whose purpose includes fighting for freedom of expression, we cannot possibly accommodate this.

The Sri Lankan government has been persistent in its intolerance of dissent, its attacks on human rights defenders and journalists and its assaults on academic freedom. The climate of impunity that exists in Sri Lanka has been devastating to civil society and to the rule of law. Brave individuals still able and willing to speak out openly against this trajectory of abuse deserve our respect and support. The organizers' retraction of their invitations sends a message that the sentiments of the officials who have been invited matter more than those of civil society participants. But in fact change in Sri Lanka, as anywhere, depends on individuals having the freedom to challenge state authorities to be accountable and to uphold human right and the rule of law. It is our duty to help them do that.

It may be the case that when the Sri Lankan authorities demanded the withdrawal of civil society actors that you had invited, as organizers, you found yourself in a dilemma. In our view the Sri Lankan authorities crossed a red line for any event organiser working in the human rights field, regardless of approach.

At the very least we believe you should have reissued the invitation to the individuals you have excluded from the conference and reassured all participants without exception that they may speak freely. We recognize that this is a difficult decision, but we have a deep concern about the compromises you have made.

It is not comfortable either to write nor probably to receive this letter but we considered it necessary to make and convey our decision and remain open to discuss the matter further.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Bennett,  
Director, Asia-Pacific Programme  
Amnesty International

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