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Hon. Ranil Wickremesinghe
Prime Minister
Prime Minister's Office
No: 58, Sir Ernest De Silva Mawatha,
Colombo 07
Sri Lanka

30 April 2019

Dear Hon. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe

PROTECTION OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Amnesty International reiterates its solidarity with Sri Lanka at this dark hour and extends our deepest sympathies to the victims, their families, and their communities. We urge the Government of Sri Lanka to apprehend and hold accountable those responsible for these heinous crimes, and put the protection of human rights at the heart of its response to this great tragedy.

We are writing to you to bring to your attention the plight of refugees and asylum-seekers in Sri Lanka after the devastating Easter bombings which took place on 21 April 2019. There are currently 1,600 refugees and asylum-seekers from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Myanmar in Sri Lanka. These people include Ahmadis and Christians from Pakistan, and Shi'a Hazara from Afghanistan – who represent a number of highly marginalized and persecuted religious groups.

These individuals have sought asylum in Sri Lanka after fleeing their homes due to persecution that have made them fear for their lives and liberty, and the lives and liberty of their family members. Sri Lanka has generously extended its protection to these individuals and provided sanctuary as they await their refugee and asylum claims to be processed by the relevant agencies. Unfortunately, after the appalling attacks across the country, around 1,200 refugees and asylum-seekers have faced hostility and threats from their surrounding neighbourhoods, which in some cases have culminated in mob violence and property damage. They have sought refuge with local law enforcement authorities, and sought shelter in police stations, places of worship and safe houses. Even in such locations, some have faced threats, and have had to leave at short notice in the past week, searching for shelter and security elsewhere.

At this delicate time, the Government of Sri Lanka is obliged to provide shelter and basic necessities, and ensure protection of these vulnerable communities from threats and violence. So far, the police and the military have provided protection. However, we have been informed that despite efforts by the UNHCR, local NGOs and the presence of law enforcement authorities, mobs have managed to threaten and force some refugees and asylum-seekers out of the temporary shelters they were moved to after the April 21 attacks. Amnesty International calls on the Government of Sri Lanka to take all necessary measures to provide protection to all refugees and asylum-seekers, clarify that any attacks on them will not be tolerated, and investigate attacks with a view to bringing perpetrators to justice.

In line with Sri Lanka's binding obligations under international law, thus far there are no public indications that the authorities have made any efforts to deport any asylum-seekers or refugees. Indeed, deporting any of these individuals to a real risk of serious human rights violations - including but not limited to violence, discrimination and serious threats to their lives – and would violate the international human rights principle of non-refoulement. We urge you to

ensure scrupulous respect for international law by continuing to provide refuge to these people, and by ensuring that they are not forced to return to their home countries by the threat of violence or persecution in Sri Lanka.

We further urge the government of Sri Lanka to ensure that all minorities are protected at this tragic and tense time, when hate may be stoked by groups that wish to encourage discrimination against minorities, or carry out attacks against them. As the Sri Lankan government investigates these crimes, we urge the authorities to bring perpetrators to account in keeping with international human rights law. We also urge the people of Sri Lanka to stand together against hate, and to eschew discrimination and violence against minorities, especially the Muslim minority community in the country. We further urge the Sri Lankan government to ensure the human rights of all concerned, in keeping with international human rights standards. In particular, prosecutions must meet international fair trial standards and not involve the imposition of the death penalty.

Sincerely,

Biraj Patnaik
Regional Director
Amnesty International South Asia

cc.

1. Minister of Foreign Affairs
2. Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
3. Inspector General of Police
4. Secretary, Ministry of Defence