

Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada

NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

www.lrwc.org; lrwc@portal.ca; Tel: +1 604 738 0338; Fax: +1 604 736 1175

3220 West 13th Avenue, Vancouver, B.C. CANADA V6K 2V5

Date: 9 September, 2013

HRC section: Agenda Item 2 General Debate

Speaker: Mr. Gary Anandasangaree

Oral Statement to the 24th Session of the UN Human Rights Council from Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada (LRWC), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

Mr. President, Madam High Commissioner, Your Excellencies

You are all too familiar with the work of Sunila Abeyasekara. The name is synonymous with human rights in Sri Lanka – a mission that captivated and motivated her to work. This afternoon, Lawyers Rights Watch Canada, IMADR, and NGO colleagues are saddened to hear of her untimely passing. She will stand as one of the most profound human rights defenders of our times.

Many in this Chamber have met her, worked with her, and marched along her side, on issues she passionately advocated for during a career spanning four decades.

Born in 1952 to a socially conscious family in Sri Lanka, Sunila became a social and political activist at a young age. She initially used drama as a tool to bring awareness to social issues of the day, and then transformed that message into direct advocacy. She advocated for the release of Sinhalese youth detained for the 1971 insurrection. She helped establish INFORM in 1989 which documented human rights abuses at a time when repression and terror in Sri Lanka escalated.

Since 1992, Sunila has worked with Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights. She was an advocate of the Free Media Movement in Sri Lanka.

She has received many awards for her work, including the UN Human Rights Award in 1999 by the then Secretary General Kofi Annan, and recognition by Human Rights Watch for her work on human rights.

Sunila was one of the very few activists who saw the onslaught of the 2009 massacre of Tamils in Mullivaikal. She reached out and worked with families of the injured. She advocated tirelessly for a peaceful resolution to the civil war and since the end of the war, she has worked towards accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Up until her last days, Sunila never waived on creating a more just society. She empowered women, workers, and young people alike. Her dedication for, and solidarity with, the oppressed peoples all over the world is truly remarkable.

Today, one of the poignant voices for peace on the island of Sri Lanka has been muted. Yet, she is responsible for motivating, mentoring and opening the doors to a new generation of activists from around the world. Her legacy will be achieved by the work undertaken by all those who admired and looked up to her.

May her soul rest in peace, and May Sunila's dream for a more equal, free, and peaceful society flourish in our time. Thank you.