

A Response to President Kumaratunge's CNN Interview (10/31/2001)

[A statement issued by University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Sri Lanka on 12/11/2001]

In her recent interview with CNN President Kumaratunge asserted that “UTHR was very appreciative of the fact” that with a few “exceptions” her government was able to “completely control the human rights violations” in Sri Lanka ([see CNN transcripts](#)). This is a gross misrepresentation of both, UTHR(J) and of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. When the PA government came into power, it ushered in a new openness and tolerance of criticism; a distinct break from the viciously repressive UNP era. However, the democratic promise that was signalled in the PA's 1994 election has been steadily eroded in the intervening years.

The resumption of the war brought again to the forefront about human rights violations against the population at large, and to the Tamils in particular. In this context, we had to confront the LTTE's role in sacrificing the community for its military agenda, and likewise role of the PA and UNP in sacrificing the community to further their narrow party political agendas. The people in the North-East have become increasingly paralysed as they have been dragged into war. We have reported on the LTTE's responsibilities for gross human rights violations in this period. At the same time, we have also reported on how the Kumaratunge government has also become increasingly draconian in its policies and practices. We have held the government responsible for the fact that they failed to bring the culprits to justice in many of the cases where human rights violations were alleged. In addition, many commissions and inquiries were initiated in bad faith rather than as a genuine effort to come to terms with the past and bring justice to victims. There was very little follow-up effort, and very few reforms that prevented the recurrence of such violations. In essence, the PA could not break the logic of the state's authoritarian character. The government's desperate bid to hold onto power at all costs has often resulted in short term political manipulation of the state structures, including, for example, election malpractices, at the expense of deeper democratic and human rights values.

From its inception, UTHR(J) has chosen to address the human rights violations, of all actors in the Sri Lankan conflict, including those of the LTTE and also of the PA government [\[1\]](#). In fact, our critique of the Sri Lankan government's abuses endorses the reporting of Human Rights Watch. Human Rights Watch is a well-respected and neutral international human rights organization that has done very important work in highlighting human rights violations by states throughout the world. In addition by presenting UTHR(J) with a Hellman/Hammett award, HRW has acknowledged and recognized the challenges faced by UTHR(J) in addressing human rights in Sri Lanka. Ironically, the political situation at the local and global levels, shows that those in power deploy strikingly similar strategies to avoid addressing the substance of a human rights critique. Kumaratunge's dismissal of Human Rights Watch as potentially a “Tiger” front organization echoes the LTTE's dismissal of UTHR(J) as government apologists. This stance is not unique to the Sri Lankan context.

In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, human rights activists have had to fight an uphill struggle to challenge all forms of oppressive ideologies and their effects on ordinary people. Often, at grave personal danger from the LTTE and/or the government, human rights organizations have drawn attention to human rights violations by the State and armed groups. In fact, even

among human rights organizations, only a few have gone beyond documenting the state's violations to *also* document violations by armed groups in the North and East. This work has been crucially important in a context where the LTTE has brutally eliminated all oppositional voices in hijacking the legitimate grievances of the Tamil people. Their power has derived from their willingness to go to any lengths, whatever the cost to human life and dignity, to maintain a brutal hegemony over all forms of political expression and organizing.

Born of this climate of terror, most Tamil media outlets, from Tamil Net to local print media, have furthered an unquestioning pro-LTTE editorial line; as members of the Tamil community, this situation presented us with a particular obligation to contest this authoritarian ethos.

Increasingly, we find our work being distorted or selectively appropriated by the State to condemn the LTTE and by chauvinistic forces in the South to oppose any political solution to the ethnic problem. For President Kumaratunga to exploit our work to whitewash her government's human rights record is a cynical appropriation of our voice.

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[\[1\]](#) UTHR(J)'s work has been driven by the conviction that violations have to be protested, irrespective of whether the perpetrators are state forces or non-state actors, Sinhalese or Tamil. Even in an armed conflict situation it is important to preserve a political space that allows reflection and dialogue on the objective reality and changing circumstances. The belief that such a political space is essential for armed groups to be accountable to its people, and for the deterrence of human rights violations, continues to be a central animating pressure in our reporting. We give below with references some idea of our coverage of violations by the State under the Kumaratunge government:

Rape and torture: Special Reports [7](#), [9](#), [12](#), and Bulletin [25](#)

Massacres & Killings: Bulletins [10](#), [15](#), [16](#), [22](#)

Harassment of civilians and freedom of movement: Bulletins [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#), [17](#), [18](#), [20](#), [21](#), [24](#)

Disappearances: Special Reports [7](#), [12](#), and Bulletins: [11](#), [13](#), [14](#)

State and its character: Special Report [8](#)