

omission has been the absence of a regional office in Jaffna. As long ago as November 1996 the government announced that such an office would be opened within two weeks. Most regrettably the authorities did not take the necessary action to implement this. The HRTF has been seriously remiss in its pursuit of wrongdoers; though many cases of violations have come to its knowledge, it has not instituted a single prosecution against an errant member of the security forces. (It is to be hoped that the Human Rights Commission will, once it gets going, manifest a more robust attitude in this regard). These deficiencies do not make the prospect of the premature demise of the HRTF any less appalling. It has been CRM's experience that prompt action has been taken on cases we have referred to it, and we certainly felt its absence when, immediately after the change of government, the provisions that all arrests must be reported to the HRTF was unaccountably dropped from the emergency regulations, and the status of the Task Force itself became unclear. There was a nine month gap during which concern was voiced by human rights organizations both at home and internationally. Fortunately the HRTF was revitalized, new regulations and important presidential Directions thereunder made, and the same staff continued, so that the expertise gathered over the years was not lost to the public.

Our country has had more than its share of "disappearances", extrajudicial executions and torture in custody. We must not ignore the lessons of experience. We just cannot afford any gap in the protection of the life and liberty of persons liable to arrest and detention. There is also the question of fair and proper treatment of its staff. It is not too late for the government to rescind the regulation which would make the HRTF disappear in a few days time, or take other remedial action to ensure its services continue uninterrupted and undiminished.

NOTES

1. The Emergency (Human Rights Task Force) Regulations No 1 of 1995
2. Presidential directions dated 18 July 1995 issued under the HRTF Regulations
3. Presidential directions Paras 3 (i), 3(iv) and 4

We referred in our last issue to certain proposed interventions by the government in the cultural field. These proposals aroused bitter contention and have been keenly debated at many meetings of interested groups.

We reproduce below a statement issued by over 150 of the most distinguished writers, dramatists, film makers and critics in the country.

PROTEST AGAINST PROPOSED BILLS CONCERNING CULTURE AND THE ARTS

We make this statement to record our reactions to and protest over four bills that have been gazetted by the Minister of Cultural Affairs to create a Central Cultural Council and three Academies for literature, theater and drama and visual arts and crafts.

We believe that any policy or policy instruments being devised today in respect of culture and the arts must take into consideration the following principles:

i. Sri Lankan society is multi-ethnic and therefore multi-cultural; it is the obligation of the state to safeguard and ensure the collective cultural rights of all ethnic groups.

ii. Sri Lanka is a signatory to international human rights instruments which oblige the government to ensure the due observance of (i) the right of all citizens to culture and to access to cultural activity and (ii) the freedom of expression in the arts.

iii. The devolved political structures we are moving to will make the promotion of culture no longer the preserve of the central government; as a matter of fact, the devolution proposals submitted to Parliament by the government indicates that culture is a regional subject; state intervention will have to be conducted at both central and regional levels.

The Government has in fact enshrined these principles in its policy statement which emphasizes "the importance of culture as a necessary dimension of total development" and maintains that "the autonomy of arts and literature" will be respected through "the minimum of interference by the state but with substantial assistance".

It is our contention that the present bills have not been drafted with these principles in mind.

Given the exigencies and immediate context of the Sri Lankan situation, we believe that some state intervention in culture and the arts is necessary; however, this intervention should be through

bodies that are free to act autonomously, are independent of the government and at a critical distance from the political process and should be restricted to the minimum consonant with the following guidelines:

- i. Policy and strategy should reflect the needs of the culture and creativity of all language groups in both urban and rural communities and ensure access to and participation in the arts by all cultural groups.
- ii. Definitions of cultural activity should be broadened to include the development of new and evolving cultural practices and not merely restricted to the continuance of tradition.
- iii. Funding assistance should foster excellence and diversity in the arts and allow artists, art and culture organizations and communities to develop their artistic potential.
- iv. In the present globalized context, policies should ensure the enrichment of the arts through access to world-wide artistic developments.

v. policies and strategies must be developed in close contact and consultation with artists and community representatives through an open process that involves full public accountability.

The present bills create bodies that do not conform to these principles and guidelines and leave room for direct political interference in culture and that arts. They create bodies whose controlling directorates are heavy with ministerial nominees and bureaucrats who would be subservient to ministerial direction; the minister can interfere in their work through directives they are compelled by law to carry out; the minister can make changes in their directorates by removing persons with no obligation to explain his actions.

We therefore ask the Government to withdraw these bills and to rethink its cultural policy in accordance with the principles and guidelines set out above which are in fact in consonance with its own policy statements, through a process of consultation with practitioners in the field of culture and the arts.

COMMUNICATION

“SIC”, “SICK”, OR SOMETHING ELSE

Mr. Regi Siriwardene appears to have been moved to an extraordinary and unprecedented degree of high dudgeon by a totally innocuous use of “Sic” after his current forename. I must confess that inasmuch as Mr. Siriwardene confesses that he would not be able to recognize Prof. R.A.L.H. Gunawardene even if he passes him in the street (whether front or back is not specified), I must also plead similar ignorance that “to the best of my recollection” I have no memory, of even a nodding acquaintance with an intellectual of Mr. Siriwardene’s calibre.

During my school-days a Mr. Regi Siriwardene was very familiar to those of my generation as a writer of distinction on various topics, political and cultural (Those days the usual forum of intellectual discourse was the newspaper and journals such as *Pravada* with wider financial backing were non-existent). Very recently, while perusing the SSA publication *Unmaking the Nation* I came across this reference to a Regi Siriwardene who had provoked a “disquiet” in the mind of the writer, one Prof. Scott. I must admit quite frankly that I had no precise information that the Mr. Reggie Siriwardene whom I admired over the years was the self-same individual who now styles himself as Mr. “Regi” Siriwardene. I presume that the current cognomen is a recent retracton. Hence the employment of the usual *sic*.

Those who are compelled to write as I do about the Sinhala identity in a period of dissension such as today are more often than not prone to be portrayed as people suffering from perverted and/or distorted minds by a certain section of scholars working on Sri Lanka. This is definitely a fine opportunity for dispassionate minds to arrive at their own judgements on the observed as well as the observers.

Be that as is may, being a purist and conventionalist I am sending this note of explication to the same journal where Mr. Siriwardene’s note appeared.

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