

Public statement regarding allegations and threats against Yasmin Sooka by the Government of Sri Lanka

The undersigned organisations and individuals wish to express our strenuous opposition to the unfounded allegations made by the Government of Sri Lanka against Ms Yasmin Sooka. These allegations and threats against Ms Sooka seek to undermine Ms Sooka's long standing reputation as a human rights defender and globally recognised justice advocate.

Ms Yasmin Sooka is a leading human rights lawyer, activist and an international expert in the field of transitional justice, gender and international criminal law. Her expertise stems from a lifetime of defence of human rights and justice.

During the apartheid years in South Africa, Ms Sooka was a member of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (South African Chapter), an Interfaith body working for peace and justice in South Africa, and later served as its President. She also was a member of the National Repatriation Committee for South African exiles -- a body which negotiated with the apartheid government to repatriate South African exiles.

Beginning in 1995, Ms Sooka served on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the Deputy Chair of the Human Rights Violations Committee. Between 2002 and 2004 she was one of three appointed international Commissioners to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone appointed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In July 2010, Ms Sooka was appointed to the three-member Panel of Experts advising the UN Secretary General on accountability for war crimes committed during the final stages of the war in Sri Lanka. Ms Sooka was later appointed by the UN Secretary General, in June 2015, to a three-member Independent Review Panel which investigated Allegations of Sexual Abuse by Foreign Military Forces in the Central African Republic as well as the UN Response to the Allegations.

In June 2016, Ms Sooka was appointed by the President of the UN Human Rights Council to chair a three-person Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, a post she currently holds. In addition, Ms Sooka is the Director of the International Truth and Justice Project, Sri Lanka. Ms Sooka is the former Executive Director of the Foundation for Human Rights in South Africa, an independent non-profit Foundation established in 1996 by President Mandela's government and the European Union. The Foundation's aims and objectives are to address the violations of the past and to build a human rights culture in South Africa. The Foundation is also a grant-maker to civil society.

Yasmin Sooka also chairs the Foundation's Task Team to deal with the Unfinished Business of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission addressing issues of criminal accountability and reparations for victims in South Africa.

Yasmin Sooka is one of the foremost global authorities on transitional justice, reconciliation and reparations, and was also one of the authors of the African Union's Policy on Transitional Justice. More recently she was invited by the Security Council to address them as one of two civil society experts in the historic open debate on Transitional Justice held in February this year.

We call attention to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In particular, we would like to refer to articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration which state that everyone has the right to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels and that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The claims by the Sri Lankan authorities against Ms Sooka are an offence not only against Ms Sooka and her organisation and the human rights community but also the many victims and survivors associated with her work. We express our serious concern at the attacks against Ms Sooka in direct retaliation for her legitimate activities in defense of human rights and victims in Sri Lanka, more particularly, to her activities in support of truth and justice.

The accusations by the Government of Sri Lanka against Ms Sooka are in violation of these fundamental international principles, and constitute yet another attempt by the Government of Sri Lanka to distract the international community from the chronic injustice and impunity that prevails in Sri Lanka.

We the undersigned call upon the Government of Sri Lanka to demonstrate their serious commitment to accountability and respect for human rights rather than continually undermining those who strive for those aims.

Signatories

Individuals

Individual signatures do not denote institutional endorsement unless also included in the list organizations.

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l'ONU, Spain

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African Truth and Reconciliation
Commission.

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Jewish Voice for Labour

Organizations

Human Rights Watch
www.hrw.org

Partners in Justice International

www.ictj.org

International Centre for Transitional Justice

www.ictj.org

International Commission of Jurists

Guernica 37 International Justice Chambers (London)

www.guernica37.com

REDRESS

www.redress.org

ECCHR – European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights

www.ecchr.eu

Center for Justice and Accountability

www.cja.org

Australian Centre for International Justice

www.acij.org.au

Amnesty International, South Africa

www.amnesty.org.za

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR)

www.asia-ajar.org

Human Rights Concern – Eritrea (HRCE)

www.hrc-eritrea.org

Refugee Law Project, School of Law, Makerere University

www.refugeelawproject.org

Freedom House

freedomhouse.org

South African History Archive

www.saha.org.za

Section 27

www.section27.org

ProBono.org

www.probono.org.za

Lawyers Against Abuse

www.lva.org.za

Lawyers for Human Rights

www.lhr.org.za

Socio Economic Rights Institute

www.seri-sa.org

Centre for Environmental Rights

www.cer.org.za

Centre for Child Law

www.centreforchildlaw.co.za

Open Secrets

www.opensecrets.org.za

Foundation for Human Rights

www.fhr.org.za

Human Rights Media Centre

www.hrhc.org.za

Khulumani Support Group

www.khulumani.net

Southern Africa Litigation Centre

www.southernafricalitigationcentre.org

Sonke Gender Justice

www.genderjustice.org.za

Legal Resources Centre

www.lrc.org.za

Equal Education Law Centre

www.eelawcentre.org.za

Imam Haron Foundation

www.imamharon.com

Impunity Watch

www.impunitywatch.org

Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

www.csvr.org.za

Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights

www.zlhr.org.zw

Kenyan Human Rights Commission

www.khrc.or.ke

Ndifuna Ukwazi

www.nu.org.za

Women's Legal Centre

www.wlce.co.za

Wayambo Foundation

www.wayamo.com

Southern Africa Human Rights Defender Network

www.southernafricadefenders.africa

National Research Foundation – South Africa Research Chair in Justice and Security, University of Cape Town

Veritas, Zimbabwe

www.veritaszim.net

Centre for Law & Society, University of Cape Town

www.cls.uct.ac.za

Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), Liberia

Actions by Christians for Abolition of Torture (ACAT-Burundi)

SOS-Torture, Burundi

www.sostortureburundi.org

SOAS Centre for Human Rights Law, University of London

www.soas.ac.uk/human-rights-law/

Ukuthula Trust Zimbabwe

Scholars at Risk Network Ireland

Counseling Services Unit, Zimbabwe

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Freedom from Torture,

www.freedomfromtorture.org

TEMPLO

www.templo.co.uk

CIVICUS

www.civicus.org

Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of the Witwatersrand

Contra Nocendi International

South Africa Bds Coalition

Pan African Lawyers' Union (Palu), Arusha, Tanzania

People's Rights Group, Sri Lanka

Jewish Voice for Labour, South Africa