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RIGHT TO INFORMATION COMMISSION

(CONSTITUTED UNDER THE ACT, No 12 OF 2016)

MEDIA STATEMENT – RIGHT TO INFORMATION COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA

8th October 2019.

In recognition of the International Day for the Universal Access to Information day on 28 September 2019, the Right to Information Commission (RTI Commission) of Sri Lanka held a series of discussions with Public Authorities in Colombo and the Provinces on Sri Lanka's Right to Information (RTI) Act & RTI Regime, culminating in workshops in Mahiyangana with the participation of Sri Lanka's 'Adivasi' (Vedda) community leader Uruwarige Wannilaththo. The 'Adivasi' leader bestowed the good wishes of his community on the RTI Commission and expressed optimism that the RTI regime will continue to bring good benefits to the people, warning however that care must be taken not allow the RTI Act to be used for personal grievances.

The Mahiyangana workshops were attended by the District Secretary, Badulla, Mrs. Damayanthi Paranagama, all Divisional Secretaries of the Badulla District, leaders of Civil Society Organisations and key public officials of the District. A separate session was held with members of Community based Organisations (CBOs) in the Mahiyangana Division to inform and educate on the RTI Act.

This programme continues the public outreach of the RTI Commission during which, similar discussions were held in Jaffna, Panama (Ampara), Kilinochchi, Ambagamuwa (Nuwara Eliya), Suriyawewa (Hambantota) and Karuwalagaswewa (Puttalam).

In furtherance of its awareness raising objective, the RTI Commission published two volumes of publications; Volume One on *The Selected Orders of the Right to Information Commission of Sri Lanka (2017-2018)* and Volume Two on *Reflections on Sri Lanka's RTI Act & RTI Regime*. Volume One contains 24 selected orders on the impact of RTI on various subject matter, ranging from declarations of assets and liabilities of politicians and bilateral agreements to release of police complaints, environment-related policy and permits etc. along with a General Index of Orders. Both Volumes are published tri-lingually.

Since its inception in 2017, the RTI Commission has seen an increase in the number of appeals to the Commission with deeper appreciation amongst citizens in regard to utilising the right to information. From individuals seeking information on personal land related matters to collective groups coming together to seek information on development projects in the public interest, the Commission has observed a wide range of information requested across diverse Public Authorities.

Over the past two years the Commission has seen an upward trend the number of appeals. While there were 230 appeals received in 2017, in 2018 there was an exponential increase to the number of appeals resulting in 800 appeals. By August 2019, the Commission received over 650 appeals. Majority of appeals are received from the Western and Southern Province while there is a significant number of appeals from the Badulla, Kurunegala and Kandy Districts as well. The Commission has issued more than 1, 500 reasoned orders, releasing information in the majority of appeals heard before it. The appeals related to a broad range of issues including corruption in the state sector, responding to disclosure requests for information relating to the Government's transitional justice policies and balancing the right to privacy with the overriding public interest. Presently, there are 3 appeals pending before the Court of Appeal against decisions of the Commission.

The RTI Commission has also commenced building partnerships with other Independent Commissions such as the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka and the National Police Commission as well as academic institutions such as the University of Colombo and the University of Kelaniya. In future, the Commission is to conduct several workshops with partner organizations and other Commissions and implement 10 training programs for leaders of Community-Based Organisations at grass-root level through District Secretaries.

The RTI Act has created a paradigm shift in Sri Lanka wherein a culture of secrecy is gradually evolving to a culture of transparency and accountability. The increasing involvement of women participation in using RTI for advocacy work is noteworthy. Furthermore, the increasing visibility and representation of men and women of low income populations who have shed their inhibitions to come before the Commission is a positive trend in Sri Lanka.

While there are success stories that Sri Lanka has experienced during a short period of two years of implementation of the RTI Act, there is much more room for improvement and commitment by Public Authorities to disclose information in their possession, custody or control. On the part of the Commission it will strive to ensure that the spirit and intention of the legislature is upheld in a manner that citizens of Sri Lanka would reap the benefits of the right to information to the maximum extent possible.

Issued on order of the Right to Information Commission Sri Lanka

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