



33rd Regular Session of the UN Human Rights Council
Item 3: Clustered Interactive Dialogue with the Working Group on Enforced Disappearances
and the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery

Oral Statement Delivered by Arulvathana Stephen Sunthararaj
(Wife of disappeared Sri Lankan human rights defender Stephen Sunthararaj)
On behalf of the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

Thursday, 15 September 2016

Mr. President, I'm Arulvathana Stephen Sunthararaj. My husband, Stephen Sunthararaj, a human rights defender, disappeared in May 2009 in Sri Lanka. Since then, I have been struggling to take care of my three young children, while searching for my husband.

I got fresh hope when I was here last September, when the OISL report was presented at the 30th session leading to a resolution on Sri Lanka. But progress in implementation has been slow and the government appears not to have political will to ensure rights of families of disappeared like me.

The ratification of the UN convention on disappearances is a welcome move, but there have been abductions reported in the months before and after, with some being found in Police custody and others fate still unknown.

I have made many complaints about Stephen's disappearance. But I got no answers for 7 years. Like me, many other wives, mothers, daughters, sisters are in search of their loved ones. So we have lost faith in government initiated mechanisms.

An Act to establish an Office of the Missing Person (OMP) was rushed through parliament without genuine consultations with us. Families fear that it may obstruct our right to criminal justice and reinforce impunity, as it appears to lack linkages to a justice process. We want to make sure the OMP has strong involvement of families of disappeared and international experts.

We also want to ensure that the government prepares a reparations policy in consultation with families of disappeared and other experts in a transparent manner. Some families have been waiting decades and we need urgent interim assistance for the wellbeing of our children and other family members.

Mauri Inoka, whose husband disappeared three years ago, tried to draw the attention of the Sri Lankan President and the UN Secretary General to her plight last week. She was obstructed by the Police. The Police is now investigating her instead of the disappearance of her husband.

The UN staff and member states doesn't seem to recognize these realities and appear to be losing interest in us, families of disappeared. The UN Secretary-General didn't meet us during his visit. I appeal to you not to abandon us. We need your help.

Thank You