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PRESS RELEASE

**Sri Lanka: ARTICLE 19 Strongly Condemns Death Threat
Against Human Rights Activist**

On 20 August 2009, Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, a human rights activist and Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a leading Sri Lankan think-tank and democracy NGO, as well as a long-standing ARTICLE 19 partner, received an anonymous death threat by post at his residence in Colombo. ARTICLE 19 unreservedly condemns this cowardly act and calls on the Sri Lankan authorities to take effective steps both to protect Saravanamuttu, along with others who may be at risk, and to investigate this crime and bring those responsible to justice.

The author of the threat alleged that statements made by Saravanamuttu had increased the risk of Sri Lanka being deprived of the European Union's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) Plus benefits in October 2009.

“This sort of threat, which is far from an isolated incident in Sri Lanka, strikes a hammer blow to freedom of expression and the open debate which is essential for democracy,” says Dr Agnès Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19. *“The space for social dialogue continues to close down in Sri Lanka, just at a time when robust debate about the country's future is most essential.”*

In Sri Lanka, threats and concrete acts of violence are all too common and usually target high profile, outspoken critics of the government. Indeed, these have become a most serious threat to freedom of expression in Sri Lanka in recent years.

In January 2009, a leading independent voice, Lasantha Wickrematunga, editor of the *Sunday Leader*, was gunned down in Colombo. Dozens of others have been killed or attacked, or received threats.

The right to freedom of expression places an obligation on the Sri Lankan authorities to prosecute these crimes. Their failure to do so has led to an increasingly blatant culture of impunity, as well as allegations of government complicity.

The government may also be in breach of its international obligations to protect freedom of expression through its harsh condemnation of its critics. The practice of equating criticism of government policy with treason or terrorism may also provide fuel for attacks or even incite them. It is appropriate for the government to respond to criticism, but not by making harsh or unwarranted allegations against its critics.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Sri Lankan authorities to take the following actions:

- Provide adequate protection to Saravanamuttu and others who may be at risk, including those who have received threats or been attacked.
- Allocate appropriate resources to the investigation of these crimes, including through the creation of a special prosecutorial office for crimes against freedom of expression, which has the autonomy and resources to undertake its mission effectively.
- Issue a clear directive at the highest level (i.e. by the President) that harsh or unwarranted statements by officials, particularly those which are aimed at government critics as such, as opposed to the substance of their criticism, will not be tolerated.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information please contact: Toby Mendel, Senior Legal Counsel, a19law@hfx.eastlink.ca, +1 902 431-3688.
- The Generalised System of Preferences is a trade arrangement which provides preferential access to EU markets for developing countries, through reduced tariffs for goods entering the EU market. GSP Plus is an additional incentive arrangement which offers further tariff reductions to developing countries who implement international conventions and standards for good governance and sustainable development.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.