

## **Open letter to Canada, President of CITES Standing Committee**

### **Subject: CITES CoP18**

Attention: Ms Carolina Caceres

Madam President,

Please allow me to offer my views on the proposal to continue to host CoP18 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Also allow me, Madam President, to offer some suggestions regarding an alternative way forward.

Long before the barbaric slaughter of hundreds of Christian, Muslim and Sri Lankan citizens – as well as some Western tourists - on Easter Day 2019, there were legitimate reasons to suggest that CoP18 was heading toward a perfect storm. So, given that there is still a possibility that CITES Secretariat might reschedule CoP18 in Colombo, we need to ask some tough questions. Above all, we need to interrogate why Sri Lanka was ever considered to be an appropriate country to host such a global event.

The truth is that – giving no thought to practicalities or the capabilities of the proposed host to cope – a group of NGOs and civil society bodies promoted Sri Lanka as the venue of CITES CoP18. They did so for wholly selfish reasons because they were determined to find a host country that shared their protectionist/prohibitionist philosophy toward the use of wild species. To that end they launched their campaign openly at the Standing Committee meeting SC 66 in Geneva in January 2016.

The plain fact is that Colombo was an entirely unsuitable city in which to host CITES CoP18. Moreover the advocates of this city were seemingly totally ignorant not only of religious sensitivities there but also of the conditions on the ground in Sri Lanka.

First – I have to ask you, Madam President, how CITES ever thought it was respectful to schedule CoP18 – 23 May to 03 June 2019 – during the final weeks of Ramadan: 05 May to 04 June 2019? I'm sure you are aware that Sri Lanka is a conflicted multi-cultural country. To many of the world's devout Muslim community our event's timing was always considered as being contemptuous of their faith. Indeed in October 2018, a group of Muslim countries wrote to the CITES Secretariat – through the Secretariat of a Regional Intergovernmental Organization, the COMHAFAT/ATLAFCO – requesting that

CoP18 be delayed until 05 June. Sadly, their request was ignored by CITES Secretariat.

The same 22 members of the COMHAFAT/ATLAFCO, collectively represented by their respective CITES focal point and Fishery representative, wrote to you on 25 April requesting not only a postponement but a change of host country, too.

Second – We have to cross-examine, Madam President, how anybody ever thought it was a good idea to hold a CITES CoP during the monsoon season in Colombo. It was never a secret that between April and September the monsoon – known as YALA locally – strikes like a hammer blow the South West portion of the Island. It brings floods, mudslides, severe disruption to traffic as well as power outages in its wake, which adds to the ever-present threat of earthquakes in the region.

Third – Sri Lanka, and Colombo in particular, has long-been considered to be a risky place to visit. Numerous travel advisories issued by responsible national authorities - including Canada - charged with keeping their citizens safe, rated Colombo as being a dangerous city. So it was widely known that Sri Lanka was politically unstable and that crime and personal threats to safety were ubiquitous. But sadly, CITES took no account of such matters when it confirmed Colombo as the host country of CoP18.

Fourth – I feel obliged to raise the contentious issues of freedom of press and speech and the right to information.

In the face of barbarism and in pursuit of law and order in its aftermath, we can all appreciate the necessity for Sri Lanka to curtail freedom as a temporary measure to stop misinformation spreading. But such national and, arguably, rational responses cannot be imposed on other nations, on other cultures or on other philosophies, especially in the context of an international intergovernmental conference.

Speaking from experience – well before the bombs went off – three different leading public relations companies in Colombo refused – for political reasons – to be associated with my NGO. They indicated that our approach to conservation was based on the sustainable use of wild resources and this was too controversial for them to handle. Moreover, we became aware that they were notifying each other ahead of us contacting them in order to make sure no PR agency accepted our briefing. In other words, they shared, without our authorization, confidential information so that they knew our names and wants

before we approached them. That experience was, to say the least, unsettling. So please forgive me for quoting from two of the email responses:

*“Thank you very much for reaching out with us. Sri Lanka is a culturally diverse country, as per our customs harming the nature (animals and plants alike) is highly frowned upon and media is highly sensitive to this subject.”*

Another response – from an unrelated firm – that we received stated:

*“Given the current sensitive political climate in Sri Lanka, particularly in relation to conservation efforts, our mutual organisations would prefer to stand clear of any controversy related to conservation.”*

From this and from similar experiences on the phone to other PR agencies, we fathomed that in Sri Lanka there is only one point of view that will be tolerated by the authorities. So we ask, what would happen to the rural and fisheries communities from foreign countries, planning to participate at CoP18 to campaign to defend their livelihoods and food security? Particularly, those bodies that wish to seek – with local PR and media involvement – support for sustainable use policies. Will they be allowed to link with the local communities openly and without interference or a black out of the news?

On a fact-finding mission to Sri Lanka we investigated its Right to Information Act. To this end we sought legal advice from a senior lawyer in Colombo. He told us that, and I quote verbatim, “seeking information from the Government on a sensitive issue does not sit well with the Right to Information Act.” So it would appear that in Sri Lanka “conservation” is such a politically sensitive issue that even PR agencies and lawyers are scared to say – or represent – anything or anybody that does not fall in line with the official position.

Fifth – Unfortunately, the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) – if I may take the liberty of being blunt – is a tad short of being state of the art. It is an early 1970s conference center that struggles to keep the washrooms clean or the building properly maintained. It is most certainly unfit and way too small to host a major global event such as CoP18. Of course, the organization committee for CITES CoP18 knew this. So they had proposed to erect a complex network of tents – in the middle of a busy city – connected by planks of wood to keep our feet dry and to accommodate large-scale overflows. But I have to ask, will the portable toilets be located inside or outside the tents or will we have to pass security in the main building to visit the loos?

Madam President, I suggest that – regardless of heightened security worries – the idea of Parties sitting in tents and moving between them and an aging conference center in monsoon conditions was never a clever idea. Not least because it will be a clammy 30 degrees centigrade.

Sixth – Colombo suffers from the most appalling traffic. As I discovered when I visited the city, the recommended convenient hotels are within 4 to 5 kilometers from BMICH. Yet driving even such a short distance becomes a problematic nightmare when one encounters serious traffic jams in the mornings and late afternoons. On my exploratory trip it took me one hour and 20 minutes to travel by car – with an experienced Colombo driver – the 4.6 kilometers that separated the OZO Hotel from BMICH at 08:00. Fortunately, my appointment was scheduled at 10:00. Thankfully, I did not have to drive that distance during the monsoon season when everything slows down considerably. But it was suggested by most of the hotels I visited, that participants to CoP18 located in the most select hotels – during the monsoon – would have to leave their hotels at 07:00 for a meeting starting at 09:00 in BMICH.

Now please allow me to point out other weaknesses of the CoP18 Organization Committee in Colombo.

- Despite genuine efforts by some Government officials, it is obvious that they were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task of organizing a CITES CoP in spite of (or maybe because of) the support provided by civil society bodies.
- Sri Lanka's political structure is weakened by 26 years of social unrest and wars. Its chronic fragility is evidenced daily by political conflicts (including physical confrontations) arising in parliamentarian discussions and on the streets. The fact is that by necessity Sri Lanka must impose extreme measures to keep control of the situation.
- The political fallout from the horrendous killing of hundreds of innocent people on Easter Day 2019 is far from resolved. Even the Sri Lankan authorities admit the risk of terror remains extremely high and that many terrorists still roam free.
- Almost a month before the opening ceremony, the host country – using the contact details provided – was unable to handout information

regarding transportation between hotels and conference facilities. In several instances, we requested information of the availability (or not) of transportation between the airport and hotels (return) and from hotels to BMICH during the Conference days. Alas, it was to no avail. But in Colombo, traffic and transport are not trivial issues.

- In the current circumstances – after the recent mass murders – with the likelihood of additional roadblocks and other necessary security barriers and checks; it is clear that the realities in Colombo will seriously jeopardize CITES’ ability to promulgate the CoP18 agenda efficiently in a timely manner.
- Also, almost a month from the Opening ceremony, several other logistical issues remained unsolved.

So I am obliged to ask rhetorically:

- Will Sri Lanka be a safer, more efficient country in a few months from now, taking in consideration the recent events? THE ANSWER IS NO!
- Will the Government of Sri Lanka be in a better position to guarantee the safety, the security and the well-being of all participants? NO!
- Will the Government of Sri Lanka be able to offer the logistical structures (meetings facilities with good modern technology and clean working toilets) required by CITES? BASED ON WHAT WE KNOW: NO!
- Will the Government of Sri Lanka be able to deliver a safe environment that is agreeable and open to all points of view, where all participants feel welcome by the host? NO!

So, for all the reasons above, we ask you to join us in concluding that it would be unacceptable to continue promoting Colombo as host of CoP18. The risks it carries – from a security, safety, lack of professionalism, efficiency and adequate premises perspective – are just too high.

I am aware that cancelling the venue of CoP18 in Colombo, will constitute a serious financial blow to the government of Sri Lanka. It is very unfortunate, but I do not believe there is another way around. On the other hand, may I suggest that Sri Lanka softens the blow and passes on the burden of its financial loss to the civil societies NGOs, which persuaded Sri Lanka and CITES to host this event in Colombo. They shall be held accountable.

## A WAY FORWARD

CITES is faced with a situation that should never have been allowed to happen. We believe that the Standing Committee, based on the authority given to it by Resolution Conf, 11.1 (Rev. CoP17), has the obligation to intervene, in order to avoid a repeat of the mistakes of the past.

Allow me, Madam President, to make the following suggestions for a way forward:

1. The Secretariat shall be requested to prepare available options – to the exclusion of Sri Lanka – for a CoP18 to be held within a period of six months between October 2019 and March 2020. The Secretariat shall also be requested to develop procedures aiming at facilitating the changes in delegations and/or registrations, as well as other elements pertaining to the postponing of CoP18, affecting all participants.
2. There shall be a two-day Special meeting of the Standing Committee Scheduled towards the end of June to decide on:
  - Time and Venue of CoP18;
  - Financial implications of the postponement;
  - Extending CITES current budget should this be required; and
  - Any other matters of relevance and importance to Parties and Observers.

Madam President, I know that this messy situation was set in motion before your appointment. I hope, however, that this letter will aid you in setting right what has gone wrong.

I look forward to your reaction.

Yours truly,

Eugene Lapointe

Former Secretary-General of CITES (1982-1990)

Lausanne, 09/05/2019