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OFFICE ON MISSING PERSONS

MEDIA RELEASE

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The Office on Missing Persons welcomes the inclusion of its interim relief proposals in the 2019 Budget

On 5 March 2019, the Government proposed the allocation of Rs. 500 million in the 2019 Budget, to provide Rs 6,000 monthly relief to support families of missing persons, including members of the armed forces and police identified as 'missing in action.' As proposed in the budget, this monthly relief will be provided to families who have obtained Certificates of Absence, until the Office for Reparations resolves their claims. The Office on Missing Persons (OMP) welcomes the inclusion of this proposal in the 2019 Budget, which was recommended by the OMP to the Government in its Interim Report of August 2018. The OMP is committed to assisting the implementation of this proposal and expanding the reach of this program to enable the thousands of families of the disappeared and missing to access this relief.

In its Interim Report, the OMP recommended that a financial aid programme be implemented to provide a monthly living allowance of Rs. 6,000 to the surviving spouse, child/children and/or surviving parent/s of a missing/disappeared person, who has no permanent income (para 45(a), Interim Report) and may be affected by other vulnerabilities.

The OMP notes that the linkage of the monthly relief to the possession of a Certificate of Absence (COA) poses a challenge. The OMP has a legal responsibility to facilitate the provision of COAs and is in the process of devising methods to increase awareness and assist families to apply for COAs. Recognising the challenges that prevent families of the disappeared and missing from obtaining COAs, the OMP is currently engaged in efforts to address these challenges. Noting these challenges and the notes the small proportion that currently possess COAs, the OMP will collaborate with the Government to expand the relief to other families of the disappeared and missing through other modes of documentation and verification.

The OMP made a number of other recommendations relating to interim relief including debt relief, housing, education, vocational training and livelihood development and employment. One such recommendation is that the families of the missing and disappeared be included in financial aid programmes and loan schemes such as 'Enterprise Sri Lanka' to help families achieve

economic independence (para 45(b), Interim Report). The OMP welcomes the Government's decision to provide families of the missing and disappeared preferential access to relevant 'Enterprise Sri Lanka' Loan Schemes in the 2019 Budget. The families are required to join the livelihood programs coordinated by the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR). Following the submission of the Interim Report in August 2018, the OMP initiated follow up action on the recommendations on interim relief and justice, and will continue to engage with multiple state and government agencies to ensure their implementation.

Under the Office on Missing Persons (Establishment, Administration and Discharge of Functions) Act, No. 14 of 2016, the OMP has a duty to provide or facilitate administrative assistance, and welfare services to relatives of missing persons (Section 13(1)(e)). Recognising the economic hardships faced by families of the disappeared and missing, the OMP identified the importance of providing interim relief to the most vulnerable among these families as vital, until compensation and other forms of reparation are provided to address their complex needs and acknowledge the harms suffered.