

Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka

01 June – 30 June 2015



Police guard Jaffna District Secretariat entrance after removing journalists from a public meeting (Image Tamil Guardian/
@mayurappriyan)

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Issues Covered

A. Freedom of Expression

B. Freedom of Assembly

INFORM was established in 1990 to monitor and document human rights situation in Sri Lanka, especially in the context of the ethnic conflict and war, and to report on the situation through written and oral interventions at the local, national and international level. INFORM also focused on working with other communities whose rights were frequently and systematically violated. Presently, INFORM is focusing on election monitoring, freedom expression and human rights defenders. INFORM is based in Colombo Sri Lanka, and works closely with local activists, groups and networks as well as regional (Asian) and international human rights networks

Summary:

Few incidents of repression of dissent continued to be reported across Sri Lanka in June 2015, with most being reported from the North and East.

In Jaffna, journalists invited for a meeting to discuss resettlement were ejected from the meeting venue. Villagers protesting against the building up of a Buddhist Temple by the military in the Mullaitivu district were arrested and detained for several hours. Surveillance and intimidations related to freedom of assembly was reported from Batticaloa and the East. Organizers, participants and supporters of protests against sexual violence against women and children were subjected to intimidations before, during and after the protests.

The Terrorist Investigation Department (TID) and Attorney General's department continued to refuse to close the investigation against INFORM's Human Rights Advisor, Ruki Fernando. They have also refused to remove the gag order and return his confiscated communication equipment, though the 15 month old travel restriction against him was lifted on 30th June.

Even though the intensity and number of incidents related to repression of dissent appear to have reduced in June 2015 compared to previous years, the continuing reports of such incidents and impunity related to old incidents is worrisome.

A. Freedom of Expression

1. Journalists removed from Jaffna public consultation on resettlement

After being invited to a public consultation meeting about resettlement with the Minister for resettlement, D. M. Swaminathan, journalists were told to leave the meeting before discussion began, reportedly at the behest of the Government Agent. Mr Swaminathan announced that the meeting was to hear the needs of those awaiting or expecting resettlement, and his words were directly followed by his staff member ordering journalists to leave the auditorium. After ejecting journalists from the auditorium, officials had placed the closed doors under police guard.

<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=15179>

2. Ruki Fernando: Travel restriction removed, but Investigation continues and Gag order remains

The overseas travel restriction imposed on Ruki Fernando, well-known Sri Lankan Human Rights Defender 15 months ago was removed 30 June 2015 by the Colombo Magistrate Courts. But the investigation by TID against him and the gag order restricting freedom of expression continues. His confiscated equipment has also not been returned. The lifting of the travel restriction was preceded by a written submission in Nov. 2014 and months of discussion with AGs department by his lawyers. During the time of restrictions even after he was given permission to travel abroad, on number of occasions he had been stopped by immigration, Terrorist Investigation Department (TID), State Intelligence Service (SIS) at the airport, for times ranging from 5-45 minutes. He had to endure delays, humiliation and embarrassment as other passengers stared.

<http://srilankabrief.org/2015/06/travel-restrictions-removed-an-e-mail-from-ruki-fernando/>

B. Freedom of Assembly

3. Arrests at protest against army-built Buddhist temple

Sri Lankan Police had arrested the owners of land which was grabbed by the Army to build a Buddhist temple after they held a protest at the location in Kokkilaay, Mullaitivu district. The owners, Thirugnanasambanthar Mannivannathas, Katharkamu Sivayogeswaran and Loganathan Jude Nimalan, had held a symbolic fast outside the Buddhist temple, which is being constructed by the military. Police arrested the men and pressured them to abandon their protest, before releasing them a few hours later.



Military at the site in Kokkilaay last week (@uthayarasashali)

<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=14956>

4. Intimidation related to protests against sexual violence against women & children

On 1st June 2015, there was a series of protests against sexual violence against women and children in about 10 districts. Organizers and participants were subjected to intimidation in several districts, before, during and after the protests, by ordinary Police, officers of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and intelligence agencies. Tamil clergy in the North who were encouraging people to attend the protests were asked not to ask people to attend

these protests and at least one house and one office of organizers were also visited in the North and East. Intelligence agency personnel in civil had also taken photographs of participants at all the protests and at one protest had asked who had organized the protest.

5. Military harassments against peaceful assembly in Batticaloa

'Military intelligence operatives of the Sri Lankan military in Batticaloa district has recently stepped up surveillance and intimidation of those who take part in civil, economic, cultural and religious meetings in all the 14 divisions of the district, according to the instructions coming from Colombo,' reported Tamil Net. The same report quoting a board member of temple management said that "The freedom of assembly is seriously threatened. Even the common public attending various meetings are being questioned," Tamilnet also quoted their sources having reported that "meetings held by Rural Development Societies (RDS), Women Rural Development Societies (WRDS), sports clubs, temple management committees are being systematically monitored in the recent days". Tamilnet also reported that "Ex-LTTE members who are forced to collaborate with the occupying SL military are being sent to the meetings with the instruction of collecting details of the 'active' participants in the social, cultural and religious meetings" and that SL military intelligence officers later make phone calls, during night times, harassing the activists with questions about the meeting and those attending the meetings.

<https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=37818>