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Sri Lanka must end its aggressive campaign against Ruki Fernando, Father Praveen and other human rights defenders, activists, journalists, lawyers and others: Amnesty International oral statement to the 25th Session of the UN Human Rights Council (3 – 28 March 2014)

19 March 2014

Item 5
General Debate

Mr President,

Amnesty International is pleased to learn of the release from custody in Sri Lanka yesterday of internationally-respected human rights defenders Ruki Fernando and Father Praveen Mahesan, a Catholic priest. They never should have been detained in the first place.

We remain deeply concerned about the welfare of other lesser known activists - including families of the disappeared - as the Government of Sri Lanka continues its crackdown on dissent, which appears to be aimed at intimidating and punishing those who attempt to communicate concerns about human rights violations in Sri Lanka to the United Nations.

Mr. Fernando and Father Praveen were arrested in Northern Sri Lanka on 16 March and detained without formal charges under Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Yesterday in a diplomatic note circulated to permanent missions in Geneva and in a right of reply under item 4, Sri Lanka sought to portray the two as engaging with persons trying to revive the LTTE in Sri Lanka.

Balderdash.

These arrests are clear attempts to prevent criticism from reaching the United Nations. Reports cite Sri Lankan officials as saying that the two men were arrested

for supplying “false information” about the human rights situation in the North of Sri Lanka to damage Sri Lanka’s reputation at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. Amnesty International is particularly troubled by reports that Sri Lankan intelligence forces may have even created a special unit to monitor those suspected of conveying information to the UN.

Instead of taking measurable steps towards ensuring justice for the victims of human rights violations, the Government of Sri Lanka wages an aggressive campaign against those advocating for accountability. Human rights defenders, activists, journalists, lawyers and others are regularly threatened and harassed.

These actions belie the Government’s stated commitment to improving respect for human rights.

Amnesty International urges Sri Lanka to correct the misinformation that it has spread about Mr. Fernando and Father Praveen and ensure respect for their and others’ safety and work as human rights defenders.

Thank you Mr. President.