

## **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT**

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### **Sri Lanka: End clampdown on university student activism**

Amnesty International has received several reports of intimidation and harassment of student demonstrators, in what appears to be an escalating effort by officials to curb student activism.

On 21 October, police fired teargas canisters into a crowd of university students protesting near Sri Lanka's Parliament building, reportedly injuring 20 students, 12 of whom were hospitalized. Water cannon were also used to disperse the crowd.

A student group claimed the injuries were caused deliberately by police who fired the teargas canisters directly at the students. According to eyewitnesses, the teargas was fired at demonstrators from several directions, surrounding them and cutting off escape routes. Students who had trouble breathing started to retreat but were met with another round of teargas fired into the centre of the crowd. Police reportedly fired teargas at the sidelines as well, trapping students who had attempted to take cover among some trees.

Although reports and video evidence suggest that the protests were peaceful, police said that allowing students to march towards Parliament when it was in session would have posed a security threat.

The march was organized by the Inter University Students' Federation and protestors had a number of demands, including increasing funds for education and university workers' wages, ending fees, and stopping "repression" against students.

This is the latest in a series of incidents targeting student organization and activism, which has also included efforts to close down student unions and suspend activist students. On 10 October, at least 12 students from Sabaragamuwa University engaged in a peaceful protest against the abolition of University Students Unions and suspension of students were attacked by masked men with alleged links to government politicians, notably a local Pradeshiya Sabha (Divisional Council) member. The attackers were reportedly armed with clubs and swords and petrol bombs, which they hurled at the students.

Amnesty International condemns these attacks and calls on the authorities to ensure the protection of rights to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedoms of association of all individuals and groups, regardless of their opinions or political affiliation. Amnesty International is concerned these incidents appear to be part of a wider trend to curb dissent. The authorities must protect students and their rights and recognize that all protesters, critics and dissenters in Sri Lanka have a right to express their views without fear of violence.

### **Amnesty International urges the Sri Lankan authorities to:**

- Ensure the protection of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association of all individuals and groups, regardless of their opinions or political affiliation, and investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of harassment, intimidation and attacks against those exercising their rights.
- Investigate alleged excessive use of force by police against student demonstrators

Links:

Photos of Inter University Student Federation demonstration in Colombo:  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/vikalpasl/sets/72157648521624789/>.