

3 August 2023

Statement in solidarity with human rights defenders and community leaders from the Malaiyaha community participating in the 'Malaiyaha Ezhuchchi Payanam' symbolic walk in Sri Lanka

Amnesty International, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and Front Line Defenders, stand in solidarity with community leaders and human rights defenders from the Malaiyaha Tamil community that are participating in a symbolic walk from Thalaimannar to Matale, Sri Lanka from 28 July to 12 August 2023. The walk, which is organized by the Collective for [Maanbumigu Malaiyaha Makkal](#) retraces the challenging journey rooted in British colonialism of the first group(s) of women and men who were shipped to Sri Lanka from South India to work on the plantations in the hill stations by the British in 1823. Thousands of early workers endured life threatening risks and immense hardship including clearing jungles and braving wild animals. A significant number lost their lives along this journey. Today, even after 200 years, the community continues to face systemic discrimination, crippling poverty and are denied equal rights.

The walk is significant as it conceptualized and led by the community themselves. The objective of the walk commemorates workers who were made to undertake this journey and their struggle while highlighting ongoing demands for the freedom and equality of the Malaiyaha community in Sri Lanka. It is an opportunity to shed light on this community's contributions, achievements, as well as their challenges and structural violence experienced over generations. The Malaiyaha community is among the most marginalized in Sri Lanka, having historically been denied citizenship and voting rights, and threatened with forced deportation and statelessness. They continue to be denied equal rights to land, adequate housing, livelihood, fair wages, education, health and other state services.

The community struggle for recognition and equality continues, as discrimination rooted in colonialism and slavery and inter-generational marginalization still affect their lives today. The Malaiyaha community and its leaders have consistently called for the recognition of their contribution, acknowledgment of historical and ongoing systemic discrimination and violations, affirmative action on access to services and a living wage. They also call for secure land tenure for housing and livelihood, language rights, an equitable and inclusive electoral system, and meaningful political participation alongside recognition and protection of their culture and identity.

On day 7 of the walk, we express our support and solidarity with community leaders and human rights defenders who continue to demand dignity and rights and redress despite inadequate response from State authorities. We further urge the government, as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to respect and protect their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.