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PRESS RELEASE**

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Sri Lankan government amplifies its 'dirty tactics' during UN session

The Sri Lankan government's ongoing dirty tactics to silence and smear dissidents are a brazen attempt to deflect criticism as the country faces fresh scrutiny at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Amnesty International India said today.

The Council is due to vote next week on a resolution calling for an international investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sri Lanka during the protracted and bloody internal armed conflict with the LTTE (Tamil Tigers). Since the end of the conflict in May 2009, the government under President Mahinda Rajapaksa has pursued a crackdown on its critics.

"Sri Lanka must put an end to the campaign of intimidation and dirty tactics against outspoken human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers and families of the disappeared," said G. Ananthapadmanabhan, Chief Executive, Amnesty International India.

The hasty release of two prominent human rights activists yesterday after their detention on 16 March is a welcome development, the organization said. But behind their case are a number of other peaceful activists who have been detained in recent months in a bid to stamp out dissent.

"While it's positive that the human rights defenders Ruki Fernando and Father Praveen Mahesan have been released, the world must not be fooled. The fact remains they should never have been arrested in the first place. The Sri Lankan authorities must stop repressing critical voices and ensure the safety of all those who peacefully express inconvenient truths about the country's post-war human rights situation," said G. Ananthapadmanabhan.

Ruki Fernando of the Colombo-based NGO INFORM and Father Praveen Mahesan, a Catholic priest, were released on 18 March after being arrested in Kilinochchi two days earlier. They were believed to be detained without formal charges under Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

In a diplomatic note circulated to UN member states' permanent missions in Geneva on 18 March, the Sri Lankan government sought to portray the two as engaging with people who were trying to revive the LTTE armed group in Sri Lanka. Reports also cite Sri Lankan officials as saying that the two men were arrested for supplying "false information" about the human rights situation in northern Sri Lanka to damage the country's reputation at the UN.

"These are preposterous allegations, and they show the lengths to which the Sri Lankan government will go to bury the truth and sully the names of its critics. Using the world stage to smear peaceful rights activists puts Sri Lanka in the company of a small club of repressive authoritarian states," said G. Ananthapadmanabhan.

"Instead of taking measurable steps towards ensuring justice for the victims of human rights violations, the Government of Sri Lanka continues to wage an aggressive campaign against those advocating for accountability and human rights."

Amnesty International has also received particularly disturbing reports that Sri Lankan intelligence forces may have created a special unit to monitor those suspected of conveying information to the UN. These allegations should be of concern to all UN member states.

The organization urges Sri Lanka to correct the disinformation that it has spread about Ruki Fernando and Father Praveen Mahesan, ensure their safety and respect their and others' work as human rights defenders.

Background

Amnesty International co-hosted a side event on 19th March, 2014 at the UN in Geneva, titled "Sri Lanka: accountability for international crimes?"

Last month the organization released a briefing, *Suppressing calls for justice*, which examines the Sri Lankan authorities' intolerance of dissent and its attacks on critics over the previous six months.

Note to editors

Amnesty International India's Advocacy Officer Raghu Menon, is following developments closely on the resolution and is available for interviews from Geneva starting March 21st, 2014.

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