

Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka

20 April – 31 May 2015



Police questioning a priest at a Tamil Commemoration held at Mullaivaikkal on 18th May 2015 (Photo – Seb BW)

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Issues Covered

- A. Freedom of Expression**
- B. Freedom of Assembly**
- C. Right to Remembrance**
- D. Repression of Student Activists**
- E. Repression of Opposition Political Parties**

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:

Incidents related to repression of dissent continued to be reported under the Sirisena Presidency, despite a general feeling of having more freedom than under the Rajapakse presidency.

In mid May 2015, Police obtained court orders to prevent remembrance events for Tamils killed during the war. Police also interrogated organizers, participants and media at some events, compelled organizers to change venue, and subjected remembrance events to heavy surveillance. Bus owners had also been intimidated not to transport people to such events. Earlier in May, a Northern Provincial Council member was summoned by Police to be questioned in relation to an allegation he had lighted lamps to remember the LTTE in November 2014.

Journalists were arrested and summoned for interrogation, assaulted by a local politician and prevented from covering a meeting related to water contamination. Two academics were assaulted during a May Day rally in Colombo and the Vice Chancellor of the Jaffna University had refused to grant permission to a discussion of a book by an award winning human rights defender and academic, on issues related to the war in Sri Lanka. In India, a film based on the life of slain LTTE TV presenter was banned.

Police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse protesters in two locations. In Jaffna, hundreds of protesters were arrested as protests against rape and murder of teenaged school girl turned violent. Local activists told INFORM that several of those arrested were those not involved in the violence. Police also obtained at least two court orders prohibiting protests in relation this incident. A senior Police officer used abusive language against an elderly woman who was protesting peacefully and trying to engage in a dialog with the police. The same officer also threatened a person who was taking a video of the incident. The Deputy Minister of Justice told media that new laws would be brought in to restrict protests to certain areas only.

A driver of a three wheeler (taxi) who transported a loudspeaker for a protest by university students was arrested and two university students involved in a protest were also reported arrested. A Magistrate also issued summons on 27 politicians aligned to the previous President, for engaging in a protest outside the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption.

A. Freedom of Expression

1. Three incidents of journalists being harassed

In a press release the Free Media Movement of Sri Lanka mentioned three incidents of journalists being harassed and barring them from reporting.

- An ITN TV reporter who has been covering short comings of a maternity clinic held at the Poddala, Bope (Galle district) local council was assaulted and prevented from doing his profession by the Council's vice president
- In Jaffna, journalists were prevented from covering a meeting held to discuss the water pollution in Chunnaka
- A journalist of the Swarnawahini TV was assaulted by a policeman while on his way home after work saying that the journalist ignore the sign to stop motorcycle he was riding (Note by INFORM - it was not clear whether this was related the person being a journalist of his work)

<http://srilankabrief.org/2015/05/violence-against-dissents-should-be-punished-fmm/>

2. Four Tamil journalists summoned for questioning



Four Tamil journalists based in the northern cities of Mannar and Vavuniya were summoned for questioning by the police in Colombo on 28th April. Anthony Thevarajan Mark of the Rupavahini Corporation, Jude Pelistis of ITN, freelancer Lambert Rosairo and Ponnaia Manikkavasagam, who works for the BBC and the Tamil daily Veerakesari.

Ponnaia Manikkavasagam (photo: internet)

<http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-concern-over-police-harassment-of-29-04-2015,47830.html> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

The journalists were questioned in relation to call by an anonymous threatening call to the Executive Director of PAFFREL (a leading election monitoring body) before the January 2015 presidential elections. That same caller had given calls to the four journalists on the same day, and the CCD (Colombo crime division) wanted to know as to whether the journalists also had been threatened. They have told the CCD that none of them had received threatening telephone calls during the period in question and that they do not keep records of every call they receive.

<http://mirror.lk/news/item/3681-tamil-journalists-quizzed-for-4-hrs> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

(Note by INFORM - it was not clear whether this was related the person being a journalist of his work)

3. Tamil journalist in Jaffna questioned

Journalist James Joseph Fernando was reported to have been summoned by the police on 26 April and questioned about articles published in 2009 in the Tamil paper "Veerakesari" that

criticized actions carried out by the government as part of its policy of resettling the North. The then resettlement minister is the current government's trade and industry minister.

<http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-concern-over-police-harassment-of-29-04-2015,47830.html> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

4. Journalist and two students detained in Jaffna

A local journalist and three persons, including two university students were arrested in Jaffna on 23rd morning. Sri Lankan police officers, dressed in civilian clothes, arrived in police vehicles to a house by the University of Jaffna where those detained had been staying. Media which covered the story had not given any reason for the arrest as police hadn't disclosed the reasons. They were detained until 27th April.

<http://tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=14533>

5. Film on slain LTTE TV journalist banned

The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) of India has refused to certify 'Porkalathil Oru Poo,' a film based on real life story of television journalist, Isaipriya, who was allegedly killed in captivity by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the final stages of the civil war in 2009, on the grounds that the film could strain "friendly relations with foreign States." Actor S. Ve. Shekar, the Regional Chairman of CBFC, had defended the decision saying that the board merely followed the Cinematograph Act.

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/film-on-slain-lankan-tv-journalist-banned/article7245848.eceVv> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

6. Obstruction to discussion of a book related to end of war in Jaffna University

On 24th April 2015, the Jaffna University Science Teachers' Association (JUSTA) had arranged a discussion of the book Palmyra Fallen written by its member Rajan Hoole, in the Library Auditorium. The Vice Chancellor (VC) with the backing of some senior academics tried to ban the discussion. But JUSTA went ahead with the planned discussion. The Vice Chancellor had told BBC Tamil Service that the ban was requested by the University Teachers Association (UTA) and the University Students Union and (the decision) was not taken by her, but by the deans' committee.

<http://oneislandtwonationsblogspotcom.typepad.com/blog/2015/05/banning-historical-memory-questions-of-politics-quality-academic-freedom-in-jaffna.html>

7. Two academics attacked at a political rally

On the 1st of May, a group of persons brutally attacked former FUTA President and current media spokesperson, Dr Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri and Dr Kumudu Kusum Kumara, also a prominent public intellectual, at Kirulapone. Dr Dewasiri and Dr Kusum Kumara had been near the May Day Rally organised by MPs Wimal Weerawansa, Vasudeva Nanayakkara and

Dinesh Gunwardene. Those attacking Dr Dewasiri and Dr Kusum Kumara had been shouting that they were responsible for defeating former President Mahinda Rajapakse. Dr Dewasiri and Dr Kusum Kumara were fortunate to get away alive, thanks to the swift action of the police who had been providing security arrangements for the rally. The mob had even tried to attack the police vehicle which took away the two academics from the site.

<http://srilankabrief.org/2015/05/the-futa-statement-on-the-attack-on-dr-nirmal-ranjith-dewasiri-and-dr-kumudu-kusum-kumara/#more-23510> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)



Dr. Devasiri and Dr. Kumara (Photo: Internet)

B. Freedom of Assembly

8. Villagers threatened for protesting on land issues

Villagers of Oddusuddan in Mullaitivu district held a protest on 13th May against the government's divisional secretary for the region, accusing of him of confiscating private lands belonging to residents. The divisional secretary reportedly failed to return the land despite being apparently ordered to do so by the local government agent. During the protest, which took place in front of the divisional secretary's office, officials came out from within the office and threatened those taking part, demonstrators said.

<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=14734> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

9. Laws sought to restrict protests

Deputy Minister of Justice Sujeewa Senasinghe had told media that laws must be introduced to restrict public demonstrations to specific areas as a move forward for to allow peaceful demonstrations in the country in order to protect the rights of activists, workers and the public. Minister Senasinghe said that in Sri Lanka the public demonstrations are carried out at times disturbing the public and causing public unrest. Therefore he added that there is a need to introduce laws that curtail demonstrations to specific areas assigned like in many other countries. According to him, right now in Sri Lanka there are no designated locations for

public demonstrations and therefore there is a necessity to introduce such places and laws to curtail the demonstrations to such areas

<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2015/04/26/laws-sought-to-restrict-protests/> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

10. Water cannon, tear gas used to disperse protestors against acquittal of murder suspects



Police at the Protest (Photo: Lankadeepa)

Police used water cannon and tear gas to disperse protesters at Kotakethana, Kahawatte who blocked the Embilipitiya-Ratnapura road on 28th evening. Police Spokesman ASP Ruwan Gunasekara said the protesters blocked the Embilipitiya-Ratnapura Main Road and Police had to use tear gas and water cannons as they hurled stones at police officers. Protests had been expressing concern about acquittal of suspects in a double murder case.

<http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=police-legal/water-cannon-tear-gas-used-disperse-kotakethana-protestors#sthash.fKjyX9LV.dpuf> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

11. Police disperse protesters against garbage dump

On Sunday evening residents protesting against the Meethotamulla garbage dump blocked the Awissawella-Colombo main road. Police Spokesperson ASP Ruwan Gunasekara said over 1,000 villagers protested demanding the removal of the 16-acre garbage site in the area blocking the road by burning tyres. The Police used water canon to disperse the protesters who were creating a disturbance by burning tyres near the vehicle service station. One protester was injured in the incident and admitted to the National Hospital.

<http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=police-legal/police-disperse-meethotamulla-protestors#sthash.0kFVtbit.dpuf> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)



Police used water cannons to disperse the protesters (Photo: Asian Mirror)

12. Senior Police officer verbally abuses elderly woman protester and threatens a person videoing the incident to stop

During protests in Jaffna against the rape and murder of teenage school girl, a senior Police officer used abusive language when addressing an elderly woman protester, and threatened a person who has been videoing the incident to stop.

<http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/video-of-sinhala-police-officer-using-racially-motivated-language-at-an-elderly-jaffna-woman-goes-viral/> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

13. Protests banned in Jaffna and protesters detained

The Jaffna court on 22nd May issued an order banning any demonstrations in Jaffna after a group of people resorted to violence during a protest outside the Jaffna court premises recently. The order was issued to Janatha Balaya Organisation, Jaffna Women's organization and Northern Provincial Councillor Anandi Shashidharan. Around 130 suspects were remanded on charges of unlawful assembly and stoning the Jaffna Courts Complex on Thursday. The protesters who had gathered in the vicinity of the Court premises turned restive when there was a delay in producing the main suspect who was alleged to have raped and killed an 18-year-old girl at Punguditivu in Jaffna.

<http://www.dailymirror.lk/73529/protests-banned-in-jaffna#sthash.cvtT2bTF.dpuf> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

14. Court banned protests in Chunnakam

On 26th the Mallakam court in Jaffna ordered a ban on protests for 14 days in a suburb of Jaffna over the gang rape and murder of student. Court order was issued upon a request by

the police. Chunnakam Police had sought a stay order from the Mallakam court upon receiving information regarding the possibility of further protests over the incident, Police Media Spokesman ASP Ruwan Gunasekara said. The recent gang-rape and murder of a 17-year-old schoolgirl had sparked public protests in the North.

http://www.colombopage.com/archive_15B/May26_1432652194CH.php (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

C. Right to Remembrance

15. NPC member summoned by Sri Lanka police for commemorating Tamil war dead

A Northern Provincial Council Member T Ravikaran, was summoned by Sri Lankan police to be investigated regarding lighting lamps in his house on 27th Nov. 2014, on Maveerar Naal (Heroes day). A police notice, written out in Sinhalese was given to Mr Ravikaran by two policemen who visited his house on 4th May. The media report stated that the instruction came from Colombo and requested that the Northern Provincial Council member visited the Mullaitivu police station for investigation.

<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=14631> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

16. Intimidation, harassments, surveillance during commemorative events for war dead in North and East



Remembrance at a Church in Mullivaikkal (Photo: Tamil Guardian)

A number of events were organized in North and East of Sri Lanka on 18th May to remember those killed during the war. More than 10 incidents of surveillance, interrogation, court orders against the events and other forms of harassments and intimidation has been reported by eyewitnesses and media, mostly by police in uniform and intelligence agents in civil. Below are some examples:

- Court order was taken against the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) event in Mullivaikkal
- This court order was shown to some women's groups by the Police to stop them from holding a separate event
- A Court order against an event was also issued in Mannar
- An event at the Eastern University in Batticaloa was also reported as banned by the Police
- Police had compelled organizers in Trincomalee to change the venue
- Police questioned a priest in Killinochchi district during a religious event
- Participants and media personnel were questioned at another religious event in Mullivaikkal
- Bus owners in Iranapalei had been intimidated not to transport people to neighboring Church in Mullivaikkal
- Police had taken details of participants at an event in Vakara in Batticaloa district
- Increased numbers of "Intelligence officers:" were reported to have been present around the Jaffna university
- Those who travelled to the event in Mullivaikkal led by the Chief Minister of the Northern Provincial Council were reported to have had their vehicles stopped by Police and questioned regarding their movements

<http://groundviews.org/2015/05/20/tamils-in-north-east-sri-lanka-remember-those-killed-despite-intimidation-and-surveillance/> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

Testimony from Fr. Elil, Rajendran, who was instrumental in organizing one commemoration at Mullivaikkal:

"A family came to see me to say that no one from Mullaivaikkal dared to participate in our religious service because officers from **CIDs had visited some local people and instructed them not to attend** the other events so they assumed they should not come to our's either. The people near the church gave me a call on the 18th May morning asking me to come as they were scared because of the unusual deployment of officers from the CID and military intelligence there. I had to ask the Sinhala priest to come with us. When the parish priest arrived, he was approached by a CID officer who inquired what he was organising. All day from morning until the end of the service in the evening, **there were two men in plain clothes seated under a tree who recorded all the activity and passed messages to their superiors.**

I received a call from another parish priest informing me that the bus owner who was providing the transport to bring the mourners to the church had refused run the bus for the service because he'd been instructed by an anonymous call not to run any bus or he would

face consequences in the future. **The same parish priest approached seven other bus owners to provide transport and all of them refused to do so because of similar anonymous phone calls they had received.** I had to organise an alternative means of transport but even then people did not turn up because the news of the bus owners receiving anonymous phone calls had spread everywhere. Until the last moment we were in suspense, unsure whether or not our religious service would be obstructed like all the other mourning events that day. When five hundred people did come for the service from the neighbouring villages, most of them were women mourning their dead. I believe it was the first time they had the space to cry out loud in grief like this. **Uninvited guests from the security forces took photos of all the participants who were mostly women in terrible grief** – hardly people who could be a security threat to the Sri Lankan state. For the first time I saw that people in the crowd were brave and began photographing those plain clothes intelligence officers who were photographing them. At the end of the service **two foreign nationals** who were present were questioned by the police as to why they were there.

<http://srilankabrief.org/2015/05/tamils-brave-harassment-threats-to-mourn-their-dead> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

D. Repression of Student Activists

17. Two University students arrested following a protest

Hulftsdorp Magistrate's Court ordered Jayewardenepura Management Faculty student Shakthi Mapavita and Kelaniya Sociology Department student Wishwa Dhanananjaya De Silva to be remanded till 11th May, on charges of damaging public property and assaulting a Police officer on 29th April during an Inter-University Bhikkhu Federation march and protest, in front of the University Grants Commission (the same report also indicated the dates as 30th April and 9th May). The protest was against the reducing of the number of subjects and the curtailing of the number of enrolments to universities. "Police officers chased after them and arrested them, after which they confiscated their mobile phones and kept them at a Police station in secrecy. This government has assaulted undergraduates and intimidated them by visiting student union leaders and activists at their homes in the middle of the night. We demand the immediate release of Mapavita and De Silva," Convenor of the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) (Najith Indika added).

<https://www.ceylontoday.lk/51-91934-news-detail-ugrads-agitate-call-for-release-of-two-in-remand.html> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

18. Remanded for providing a loudspeaker to student protesters

On 11th May a driver named Sugath Prasanna Liyanage was remanded by the Colombo Chief Magistrate Gihan Pilapitiya for carrying a loudspeaker in his three-wheeler as part of a University student demonstration. Students were demonstrating in front of the University Grant Commission. He was remanded till 25th May.

<http://www.lankadeepa.lk/index.php/articles/315830> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)

E. Repression of Opposition Political Parties

19. Demonstrators summoned by the court

Colombo Chief Magistrate, Gihan Pilapitiya, on 24th April, had issued notice on 27 persons including prominent UPFA Parliamentarians and Provincial Councillors, for staging a protest opposite the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC) on 23rd April, defying court orders. All of them given bail on the same day.

<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2015/04/26/new03.asp> (Last accessed on 2nd June 2015)