



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
28 February 2012

English only

---

## Human Rights Council

Nineteenth session

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Front Line - the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[14 February 2012]

---

\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **The situation of human rights defenders in Sri Lanka in 2011**

Human rights defenders (HRDs) in Sri Lanka continued to suffer attacks and intimidation throughout 2011 and in 2012. Impunity for attacks and threats against HRDs, labelling HRDs as ‘terrorists’ or traitors, the campaign against HRDs in the State media and linking these to sessions of the UN Human Rights Council have significantly increased the risks involved in defending human rights in Sri Lanka. This submission focuses on incidents in 2011.

Several HRDs have been forced to limit their work, maintain a low profile, or seek protection abroad. HRDs working in the North and East are particularly vulnerable to persecution and often lack access to the limited protection available to HRDs in the South.

### **Attacks against journalists, media rights activists and trade union leaders**

Lanka-e-News (LeN) journalists continued to face threats in 2011<sup>1</sup>. In January 2011, its office was destroyed in an arson attack. LeN journalists faced threats and surveillance afterwards. There was also an attempt to implicate LeN journalists in the attack. The organisation's editor, Benette Rupesinghe, was arrested and detained on false charges. Senior journalist, Shantha Wijesooriya, was arrested and detained and the LeN website was blocked by judicial order in April 2011. Shantha continues to face threats, intimidation and surveillance.

State media workers protesting against politicisation and misuse of state-media resources have been threatened and accused of anti-government activities. Senior journalist and trade union leader, Dharmasiri Lankapeli has been repeatedly attacked as a LTTE supporter and traitor, severely compromising his safety and work. The contract of a senior state-media journalist, who protested against the misuse of state-media resources during the 2010 presidential election, was terminated in 2011. He continues to face serious threats.

In November 2011 the Government announced that all websites with contents relating to Sri Lanka must be registered with the Ministry of Media. Several independent websites have been blocked.

### **Abduction and arbitrary detentions of human rights defenders**

On 9 December 2011, Lalith Kumar Weeraraj and Kugan Muruganandan were abducted in Jaffna, while organizing a press conference to mark international human rights day.<sup>2</sup> Lalith has worked extensively with families of the disappeared in the North and East and campaigned against arbitrary detention and for the release of political prisoners. In March 2011, he was abducted while organizing a protest in Mannar. In November 2011, he was severely beaten by armed thugs in Jaffna. Shortly before he disappeared his father was warned that Lalith must stop his work in Jaffna. There is no information regarding their whereabouts although Government Ministers have made contradictory statements including that they had been detained and would be produced in Court shortly.

---

<sup>1</sup> LeN is an independent web portal, known for publishing news critical of the Government.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed account of the abduction, see <http://groundviews.org/2011/12/19/disappearance-of-human-rights-defenders-political-activists-lalith-kumar-weeraraj-and-kugan-murugan-on-9th-december-2011/>

On 10 December a group of HRDs who traveled to Jaffna to attend a protest to mark international human rights day, were detained by police for several hours and prevented from attending the protest<sup>3</sup>.

### **Retaliation against HRDs using UN mechanisms**

HRDs and journalists who are believed to have links with the international community including the UN are accused of conspiring against the Government and supporting the LTTE. In September 2011, exiled Sri Lankan human rights defender Sunanda Deshapriya was attacked in the state-media and on several websites, following his attendance of an informal meeting during the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

In January 2011, a state controlled newspaper published the names of fifteen HRDs from the North, who attended training on the UN complaints mechanism. One HRD named in the article, faced serious threats and surveillance afterwards. From September to November 2011, he was tortured by the military and intelligence officers who accused him of documenting cases of disappearances and detention and sending information to the UN. He is currently seeking protection abroad.

### **General suppression of dissents**

The Government has used a number of measures including repressive laws and false arrests/prosecution to suppress dissents within Sri Lanka. Several persons attempting to expose governmental corruption or malpractice in State institutions have faced violent reprisals.

Thushara Jayarathne, a law student who accused the Law College of Sri Lanka of examination irregularities including giving special privileges to Namal Rajapakse, Member of Parliament and eldest son of President Mahinda Rajapakse, has reported repeated threats and attacks and has lived in hiding since April 2011.

University student leaders/activists in the South protesting against government policies have been threatened and several of them were placed under surveillance.

In May 2011, the police attacked Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers protesting against the Government proposed pension bill, including inside the factories where they worked. Several workers were injured in the attack and one person, Roshen Chanaka was killed. In July 2011, intelligence officers entered the office of the FTZ and General Services Employees Union (FTZGSEU), questioned and intimidated those present and searched through files and documents.

In November 2011, the office premises of Companions on a Journey, an NGO working on HIV/AIDS prevention were searched by police and those present were questioned for several hours and intimidated. Prior to this incident, the group was attacked in a Sinhala newspaper, and accused of promoting homosexuality under the guise of HIV/AIDS prevention. The NGO has ceased to function as a result of the threats and harassment.

Court cases against HRDs filed in 2009 and 2010 remained pending, with no evidence or charges brought forward.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For detailed account of the incident, see <http://groundviews.org/2011/12/14/42-political-activists-and-hrds-detained-and-prevented-from-participating-in-peaceful-protest-in-jaffna-town-on-human-rights-day/>

In conclusion, Front Line Defenders calls upon the government of Sri Lanka to:

- Stop the persecution of human rights defenders and journalists within Sri Lanka and create an environment where human rights defenders, journalists, and others critical of the government can operate without fear and undue restrictions;
- Conduct independent inquiries into the sources of threats, ill-treatment, torture and all forms of intimidation and harassment directed towards all those human rights defenders mentioned in this report, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
- Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from making statements or declaration stigmatising the legitimate work of human rights defenders;
- Cooperate fully with Ms Margaret Sekaggya, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, including by accepting her request for the visit to Sri Lanka.

---

---

<sup>4</sup> For example the case against Santha Fernando, Executive Secretary of the Commission for Justice & Peace of the National Christian Council and Aruna Roshantha and Marcus Fernando, fisheries union leaders