

13 November 2019

### **Sri Lanka: Human rights lawyer Kumaravadiwel Guruparan barred from practicing law**

On 9 November 2019, **Kumaravadiwel Guruparan**, a human rights lawyer and Head of the Department of Law at the University of Jaffna, was informed by Jaffna University Council that he will no longer be permitted to practice as a lawyer in Sri Lankan courts. The decision was made by the University Grants Commission (UGC), at the instigation of the Sri Lankan military and is an act of reprisal against his peaceful human rights work.

Kumaravadiwel Guruparan is a human rights lawyer based in Jaffna, in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. He is the founder and executive director of the Adayalam Center for Policy Research, a human rights organisation, based in Jaffna. Guruparan is also a senior lecturer and head of the Department of Law at the University of Jaffna, a position he has held since September 2011. As a human rights defender, Guruparan advocates on behalf of victims of human rights violations, many of whom are from vulnerable and impoverished communities, in their fight for justice and redress. In his capacity as a lawyer, Guruparan is involved in several high profile legal cases pending before court. The cases are aimed at holding the Sri Lankan military accountable for crimes including extra judicial killings and enforced disappearances of civilians in the north and east of the country. Recently he has faced threats, intimidations and attempts to suppress his work. These have been instigated by the military, in order to subvert justice and hamper the cases' successful litigation in court.

The decision of the UGC to bar Guruparan from practising law, is direct capitulation to pressure from the Sri Lankan military. On 21 August 2019, the military sent a letter to the UGC questioning the basis on which Guruparan was permitted to practice as a lawyer in court. There are clear departmental procedures permitting Guruparan to practice law and the military has no official capacity to interfere in university matters. Nevertheless the UGC confirmed on 19 September 2019 that Guruparan should no longer be permitted to practice, and forwarded the decision onto the University of Jaffna. On 9 November 2019, in its first official meeting since receiving the UGC letter, the Jaffna University Council determined that Guruparan would be required to act in accordance with the UGC decision on this matter.

This is not the first instance of harassment and intimidation directed against Guruparan by the Sri Lankan military and intelligence services. He has been targetted in relation to his representation of victims in the Navatkuli habeas corpus case, related to the enforced disappearance of over twenty-four Tamil youth from military custody in 1996. On 1 August 2019, Guruparan and other lawyers appearing in the case were photographed by unidentified men in civilian dress inside the court premises. In July 2018, a woman human rights defender who was assisting lawyers and victims in the same case, was brutally beaten by unidentified men in Jaffna. On 7 August 2019, three officers from the Terrorism Investigation Department visited the Adayalam Center office premises in Jaffna and demanded access to staff records and programme work being carried out by the organisation. Other lawyers working on the case have also faced harassment and intimidation.

The conduct of the military and the UGC decision is a clear reprisal against Guruparan's human rights work and an attempt to prevent him from pursuing legitimate justice for crimes committed by the military through the courts. This latest incident, forms part of a pattern of threats, surveillance and intimidation against Guruparan, his colleagues, and more generally against human rights defenders working in the north and east of Sri Lanka in the lead up to the presidential election on 16 November 2019.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the harassment of Kumaravadivel Guruparan as it believes that the human rights defender is solely being targeted as a result of his peaceful and legitimate human rights work.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Sri Lanka to:**

1. Immediately revoke all restrictions against Kumaravadivel Guruparan, including his right to practice law and support victims of human rights violations in their pursuit of justice through court;
2. Guarantee the safety of Kumaravadivel Guruparan, and all those involved in the Navatkuli Habeas Corpus case, including family members of the disappeared, and take immediate steps to prevent any act of reprisal or intimidation against them;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Sri Lanka including those documenting human rights violations, supporting victims and pursuing accountability for military crimes, are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including surveillance and legal harassment.