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## **Sri Lanka: Reprisals against peaceful protesters protesting against ongoing pastureland encroachment in Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu, Batticaloa**

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the persecution and reprisals perpetrated by Sri Lankan authorities against peaceful protesters in Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu, Batticaloa, who are demonstrating against the ongoing encroachment of their pastureland. The authorities have responded to their expression of dissent, protests, and the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly with assault and intimidation.

Sri Lankan police employed excessive force against a gathering of peaceful protesters who had convened to express solidarity with minority Tamil livestock farmers and their families from Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu in Batticaloa. These farmers had been engaged in a continuous protest for 24 days, highlighting their concerns regarding the government's failure to address the issue of land encroachment by illegal majority Sinhalese settlers from districts like Ampara and Polonnaruwa, which share a border with Batticaloa. During this protest, the police resorted to indiscriminate beatings, specifically targeting peaceful protesters, including human rights defenders and families of the disappeared.

Since 2013, pasturelands in Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu have been occupied by majority Sinhalese settlers from districts like Ampara and Polonnaruwa, which share a border with Batticaloa, with state backing. This occupation has forced Tamil livestock farmers to sell their cattle, leading to increased cattle mortality and the need to seek alternative employment opportunities. The farmers have pursued legal action to remove some of the illegal occupiers from these pastures. However, to this day, more than 500 majority Sinhalese families continue to disrupt the day-to-day activities of these Tamil livestock farmers through various means. [In January 2021](#), Tamil livestock farmers who were searching for their missing cattle were abducted and brutally assaulted by armed Sinhalese individuals. Furthermore, these Tamil livestock farmers have been unjustly accused of baseless allegations by government authorities who have also initiated legal proceedings against them. Several incidents of livestock killings have been reported in these areas, creating a hostile environment for these livestock farmers, and frustrating their ability to sustain their livelihoods. Despite facing numerous challenges, the farmers initiated a peaceful protest to voice their concerns and to gain control over these pasturelands. They adopted a 24-hour rotational [protest](#) strategy, commencing their protest on 15 September 2023, which continues to this day. On the 22nd day of their protest, the farmers conducted a symbolic protest by [begging](#) in front of the Siththaandy Pillayar Temple in Batticaloa, highlighting the dire circumstances they have been compelled to undergo.

On 8 October 2023, hundreds of protesters and human rights defenders, embarked on a peaceful march towards Chenkalady Central College in Batticaloa with the intention of meeting the Sri Lankan President. The President had come to Batticaloa to attend a school event. The purpose of the protest was to voice the ongoing reprisals faced by Tamil farmers due to the presence of illegal Sinhalese settlers and to seek concrete solutions. However, in an effort to obstruct the protest, the Sri Lankan police intervened and set up barricades to impede further progress.

Moreover, the police resorted to physically assaulting peaceful protesters, which included women, human rights defenders, and families of the disappeared. A police officer also used a megaphone to announce that the protest was being recorded, and warned that legal action would be taken if

the protesters did not disperse promptly. A male police officer [assaulted](#) and forcibly [pushed](#) the Batticaloa district leader of families of the disappeared. The protest was also recorded by intelligence personnel, and the police riot squad, [armed](#) with water cannons, shields, and batons, was also present at the protest site. Furthermore, a bus carrying nearly 50 protesters, including members of the families of enforced disappearances from Ampara who had come to join the protest, was stopped by the police at the Kallady bridge in Batticaloa at around 8:30 am and was not allowed to proceed until the protest concluded.

This is not the first time that activists, including human rights defenders, have faced persecution while investigating this issue. [In August 2023](#), a delegation comprising inter-faith personalities, human rights defenders, and journalists conducted a visit to these locations to express their solidarity and to document the grievances of farmers whose lands had been occupied. They were engaging with one such farmer whose land had been taken for the construction of a Buddhist temple. However, the activists' situation became hostile when they were confronted by a Buddhist monk and his associates who took the activists [hostage](#) for over 5 hours. During this time, they physically assaulted a Hindu priest, issued threats to set fire to all the activists inside their vehicles, confiscated journalists' equipment, and deliberately deleted their files.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned by the continuing reprisals against peaceful protesters, including human rights defenders, especially in the North and East of Sri Lanka. There are daily reports of harassment of human rights defenders, peaceful protesters, civil society activists and journalists in the country as reprisals for their genuine work. Minority Tamil and Muslim human rights defenders, especially those operating in heavily militarized, conflict-affected regions, are particularly vulnerable to reprisals. We call for an end to the repression, harassment and intimidation against peaceful protesters including human rights defenders and families of the disappeared advocating for justice and peacefully expressing their demands in Batticaloa. We urge the Sri Lankan authorities to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally stop all attempted threats against peaceful protesters and human rights defenders demanding justice for land grabbing in Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu, Batticaloa;
2. Respect these protestors' rights of freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly, including to participate in public protests;
3. Initiate a legal reform process by consulting independent civil society members, journalists, and human rights defenders. This process should review existing laws, rules, policies, and practices, particularly those that criminalize peaceful expression and which are used against human rights defenders, with the goal of ensuring that these laws and practices align with Sri Lanka's responsibilities under international human rights laws and standards and protect minority rights;