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Sri Lanka: Human rights defender and journalist Kanapathipillai Kumanan intimidated

On 7 June 2022, **Kanapathipillai Kumanan**, a human rights defender and independent journalist based in Mullaitivu, was intimidated by the Sri Lanka Police and Sri Lanka Navy personnel while he was covering a protest against forcible acquisition of land by the Sri Lanka Navy in Vattuvakkal, Mullivaikkal. Kumanan was blocked from covering the protest, threatened with arrest and physically removed from the protest site.

Kanapathipillai Kumanan is a Tamil journalist and human rights defender based in Mullaitivu, Sri Lanka. He is a photo journalist and an activist covering violations against Tamil civilians by security forces in the heavily militarised North and East Sri Lanka. Following the end of the armed conflict in May 2009, Kanapathipillai Kumanan has played a key role in covering issues including enforced disappearances, military land acquisition and environmental crimes. He also supports the campaigns of survivor defender communities for truth, justice and redress.

On 7 June 2022, Kanapathipillai Kumanan was covering a local protest against forced land acquisition in Vattuvakkal, Mullivaikkal by the Sri Lanka Navy. The land is planned to be used for the expansion of the Gotabhaya Naval Camp in the area. While he was covering the protest on 7 June 2022, Sri Lankan security officers harassed and grabbed him in an attempt to prevent him from taking photographs of the protest. A Sri Lanka Navy officer in uniform threatened him to stop taking photographs. Sri Lanka police officers grabbed Kanapathipillai Kumanan and attempted to seize his official media card. During the incident the Navy officer repeatedly asked the intelligence and police officers to arrest Kanapathipillai Kumanan. The human rights defender was undeterred and continued to document the protest and intimidation against him and others by security forces. Kanapathipillai Kumanan repeatedly asked “why are you laying your hands on me?” when officers attempted to manhandle him. The human rights defender was eventually forced to leave the site by security officers.

In July 2021, the Sri Lanka navy deployed dozens of troops in response to a peaceful protest against a mass land-grab in the Vattuvakkal area, following heavy local opposition and protest. Efforts were stepped up to permanently seize 617 acres of Tamil-owned land for the Gotabhaya Navy Base, a process that began with a gazette in 2017 but has stalled due to heavy local opposition and protest. Mullivaikkal is one of the highly militarised areas in Sri Lanka. Militarisation in this particular area continued even after the end of the civil war, and local communities have been campaigning for several years for the return of land acquired forcibly by the Sri Lankan military.

This is not the first time Kanapathipillai Kumanan has faced reprisals. The human rights defender has been threatened and physically assaulted previously due to his work. Journalists and human rights defenders in Sri Lanka have faced violence and repression as a result of their work, especially in the North and East. There is a culture of impunity for attacks against activists in the North and East, and those who continue to work do so under extremely hostile conditions at great per-

sonal risk. There is limited attention to the crimes against them and perpetrators are not held to account.

In October 2021 Kanapathipillai Kumanan and another journalist were assaulted by timber smugglers while reporting on illegal deforestation and timber smuggling in the Murippu forest area in the Mullaitivu district. In June 2019, Kanapathipillai Kumanan was physically assaulted and verbally abused by the officer in charge (OIC) of the Kokkilai police station in Mullaitivu district, while reporting on the failure of law enforcement to implement a court order relating to a dispute between a Hindu and Bhuddist temple at the Neeraviadi Pillayar Kovil in the Mullaitivu district.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned about continuing reprisals against Kanapathipillai Kumanan and human rights activists and journalists, especially in the North and East. There are daily reports of harassment of human rights defenders, peaceful protesters and journalists in the country as reprisal for their work. Tamil and Muslim human rights defenders, especially those working in heavily militarised war affected areas are particularly vulnerable to reprisal.

Front Line Defenders urges the Sri Lankan authorities to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally cease all attempted threats towards human rights defender and journalist Kanapathipillai Kumanan aimed at preventing him from carrying out his human rights work and reporting;
2. Immediately and unconditionally cease all forms of surveillance or harassment against Kanapathipillai Kumanan as it is believed that these measures are not only solely related to his legitimate human rights activities but, furthermore, constitute a direct transgression of his rights;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Sri Lanka are able to carry out their human rights and journalistic activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, in line with Sri Lanka's international human rights obligations and commitments;
4. Initiate a comprehensive legal reform process, in genuine consultation with independent civil society, journalists and human rights defenders, to review existing laws, regulations, policies and practices, especially provisions related to offences criminalising peaceful expression used to target human rights defenders, with a view to aligning them with Sri Lanka's obligations under international human rights law and standards.