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Sri Lanka: Threats and intimidation against human rights defender Jeewaratnam Suresh

On 16 December 2023, human rights defender **Jeewaratnam Suresh** received a threatening phone call from an unidentified number warning him to stop his advocacy or face dire consequences. The threats are linked to a fundamental rights petition filed by the human rights defender in March 2023 seeking improvements in housing rights for the persecuted Malayaga Tamil community. In December 2023, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka found in favor of the petition, mandating Sri Lankan authorities to provide house numbers/addresses to persons living in plantations. As a result of the human rights defender's engaging in follow up advocacy to ensure effective implementation of the court's decision, he has received threats, warning him to cease his work on this issue.

[Jeewaratnam Suresh](#), is a human rights defender based in the Muvankandha plantation, in Mavaththagama, Kurunegala, (North Western Province) Sri Lanka. Jeewaratnam Suresh is a strong advocate for the rights of the Malayaga Tamil community, also referred to as 'upcountry Tamils', a historically persecuted minority community in Sri Lanka. The human rights defender has campaigned for equal rights for Malayaga Tamils, including land and housing rights. Jeewaratnam Suresh has mobilized community campaigns demanding rights and an end to systemic discrimination against the Malayaga community. He has also worked with the human rights organizations, including [Jana Avabodha Kendraya](#) and the [Center for Policy Alternatives \(CPA\)](#).

In March 2023 Jeewaratnam Suresh [filed](#) a fundamental rights petition before the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka seeking relief related to housing rights for the Malayaga community, especially those living in plantations. The petition calls on the defendants, which includes the Minister of Public Administration, to provide permanent postal addresses to Malayaga Tamils residing in Sri Lanka, something which they have so far been denied by the state. [On 4 December 2023](#), the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka ruled in favor of the Petition and mandated the relevant state authority to provide postal addresses to all residents in the plantation areas. Encouraged by this decision, Jeewaratnam Suresh and fellow human rights defenders from the Malayaga community are currently engaged in strategic advocacy to ensure effective implementation of the Court's decision.

On 16 December 2023, at 11:26 am, Jeewaratnam Suresh received a call from an unidentified number on his mobile phone. The caller warned Jeewaratnam Suresh to stop further advocacy or attempts to implement the Supreme Court judgment and threatened him that there would be consequences if he failed to comply. Concerned for his safety, the human rights defender [posted](#) the incident on Facebook and made it public.

Jeewaratnam Suresh has been threatened in the past due to his engagement in human rights advocacy on the rights of the Malayaga community. In November 2023, Jeewaratnam Suresh organized a peaceful protest in the Mavaththagama Ptiyakanda rubber estate, Kurunegala, advocating for land and adequate housing rights. Hundreds of protesters, including human rights defenders and journalists, were present during this protest. After the protest, a person claiming to be an intelligence officer called a family member of Jeewaratnam Suresh and inquired about his activities and whereabouts. In July 2023, Suresh played a key role in the [Maanbumigu Malayaha Makkal](#) – a symbolic walk that retraced the challenging journey endured by the first group of Malayaga Tamils who were brought from India to Sri Lanka under British Colonial rule, to work on plantations in the hill stations of Sri Lanka. During the walk, the human rights defender received several phone calls

from intelligence officers seeking information as to his plans, whereabouts and also on the progress of the walk.

Front Line Defenders recognizes the immense contribution of human rights defenders in Sri Lanka, especially those from oppressed minority communities, particularly in realizing adequate housing rights. Front Line Defenders is concerned by the threats against, and intimidation of, Jeewaratnam Suresh in connection with his advocacy and successful legal challenge to advance his community's rights. We believe these threats are an attempt to silence the human rights defender and keep him from pursuing his important work.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Sri Lanka to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats against human rights defender Jeewaratnam Suresh with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Ensure the physical and mental integrity and safety of Jeewaratnam Suresh and his family members;
3. Guarantee the freedom and safety of all human rights defenders in Sri Lanka, particularly those from minority ethnic communities, enabling them to engage in their vital work of promoting and safeguarding human rights free from intimidation, harassment, threats, or restrictions.