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Sri Lanka: Human Rights Defender Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero Arrested

On 26 May 2022, **Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero**, a human rights defender and Buddhist priest was arrested by Sri Lankan police in Weeraketiya (Hambantota District, Southern Province). He is falsely accused in seven separate incidents under the Sri Lanka Penal Code and the Public Property act, linked to violence that took place on or around 9 May 2022. Rahula Thero appeared before the Walasmulla Magistrate's Court on 27 May 2022 and will be remanded in custody until 31 May 2022. The human rights defender has been targeted due to his support for peaceful protests calling for the resignation of the President and for a change in the system of governance in Sri Lanka in light of the ongoing economic crisis. The next hearing of the case before the Magistrate Court is scheduled for 31 May 2022.

[Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero](#) is a human rights defender and environmental rights activist campaigning on issues of social justice, environmental rights, and human rights since 2005. He is an active member of the Centre for Environment and Nature Studies and has created space at his temple, Bodhirukkārāma in Kudabibula, near Weeraketiya for community members, professionals and civil society to engage on issues of human rights, justice and the environment. His human rights work and public support in solidarity with victims of violations including persecuted religious and ethnic minorities is especially significant given his location- the Hambantota district, a stronghold of the ruling Rajapaksa family. Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero has been vocal on several issues, including the construction of a road through the Sinharaja forest, the contamination of water and the shooting of civilian protesters in Rathupaswala. He has also been vocal against racist attacks on Muslim villagers during the Wilpattu conservation environmental crisis, and most recently, in the farmers in Hambantota's struggle in seeking a resolution to human-elephant conflict.

In the context of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka and nationwide protests against the current government, Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero has been supportive of the peaceful protests. He has been campaigning alongside and in support of those seeking genuine system change, transparency, accountability for violations and an end to corruption. Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero has been present from the outset at Galle Face, in Colombo, where protesters have set up the protest site 'Gota Go Gama', calling for the resignation of the President Nandasena Gotabhaya Rajapaksa among many other demands. He founded the 'Gota Go Gama Environmental Unit' and has initiated many public discussions on human rights, environment and justice at the protest site.

On 9 May 2022, unarmed peaceful protesters at the 'Gota Go Gama' were attacked by an armed mob supportive of the current government. Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero was unable to reach Colombo due to an island wide curfew but spent the night at a temple in Matara town where he also delivered a speech condemning the attack. To date there have been no effective investigations against those responsible for the attack on unarmed protesters. Instead, the current

government has begun a crackdown on protesters with several thousand arrested on charges of violence, arson, and destruction of property. A week following the violence on 9 May 2022, two unidentified persons visited Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero's temple, while he was in Colombo and inquired about his whereabouts. On 26 May 2022, a fellow Buddhist priest from the same temple was summoned for questioning by the local police. Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero accompanied the priest and they were both arrested on accusations of arson, assault and destruction of public property. Seven cases have been filed against the defender, under provisions of the Penal Code and the Public Properties Act. The arrest was made, despite submissions by the human rights defender that he was not in Hambantota and that he was at a temple in Matara approximately 47km away at the time of the violence. Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero was produced before the Magistrates Court on 27 May 2022 and remanded until 31 May 2022 when the case is to be heard next, on which date lawyers will make an application for the defender to be released on bail.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arrest of human rights defender Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero, as it believes it to be a reprisal against his legitimate and peaceful human rights work and the exercise of his fundamental freedoms of expression and dissent.

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

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero and drop all charges against him as we believe they are solely motivated by his legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Immediately and unconditionally cease all attempts to threaten and harass Ven. Wekandawala Rahula Thero, as these measures are not only solely related to his legitimate human rights activities but, furthermore, constitute a violation of his rights;
3. Guarantee under all circumstances that the human rights defender is not subjected to any form of torture and other ill-treatment while in the custody of the police;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Sri Lanka are able to carry out their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, in line with Sri Lanka's international human rights obligations and commitments;
5. Initiate an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the violent attacks against peaceful and unarmed protestors in Sri Lanka with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards.