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Sri Lanka: Unlawful arrest and assault against human rights defender and journalist Tharindu Uduwaragedara

On 28 July 2023, **Tharindu Uduwaragedara**, a Sri Lankan human rights defender and journalist, was assaulted and unlawfully detained by the Borella Police while covering a peaceful protest in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The police assaulted and verbally abused the human rights defender, and accused him of being a national traitor working for foreign money. The human rights defender was held at the Borella police station and appeared before the Colombo Chief Magistrate the following day on 29 July 2023. He was released on bail on the order of the Chief Magistrate but remained in hospital for treatment of his injuries.

[Tharindu Uduwaragedara](#) is a human rights defender and independent journalist. He reports critically on social issues and highlights the violations faced by oppressed and vulnerable communities. As a human rights defender, he advocates for freedom of expression, and documents and participates in peaceful protests across the country. He is an active member of the [Sri Lanka Young Journalists' Association \(SLYJA\)](#) and the [Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association \(SLWJA\)](#). He has worked at several Sinhala language newspapers, including [Ravaya](#) and [Anidda](#), known for their investigative journalism and open critique of the government. Tharindu Uduwaragedara has his own YouTube channel, [Satahan Radio](#), dedicated to independent reporting on social issues and human rights violations.

On 28 July 2023, the human rights defender Tharindu Uduwaragedara was arrested while covering a peaceful protest organised by the Joint Development Officers' Union and other trade unions against the government's actions which negatively impact pension funds, their failure to address workers' issues and unjust labour laws under the guise of restructuring domestic debt. As Tharindu Uduwaragedara approached the protest site on Cotta Road in Borella, he noticed a police riot squad vehicle driving [recklessly](#) towards the peaceful protesters. Concerned about the situation, he got out of his vehicle and walked toward the protesters to capture the incident on video. The police responded to the peaceful protest with disproportionate force, pelting stones and firing tear gas and water cannons at protesters. At around 2 pm Tharindu Uduwaragedara got into a three wheeler and tried to leave the protest site while simultaneously recording the police violence on his phone. Police stopped his vehicle, [dragged](#) the human rights defender out by his hair and brutally beat him before forcing him into a police jeep. While being taken to the Borella police station, the human rights defender was physical beaten and verbally abused by two police officers inside the jeep.

Following his arrest on 28 July 2023, Tharindu Uduwaragedara was held at the Borella police station for nearly 16 hours, before being referred to the Judicial Medical Officer. At around 3.30pm the same day, based on a complaint by the SLYJA to the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL), two officers from the HRCSL visited the Borella police station. The human rights defender was denied medical treatment for his injuries despite repeated requests, including from his lawyers and the HRCSL.

Early the following morning of 29 July 2023, at around 1am, the police recorded Tharindu Uduwaragedara's statement. At approximately 8am that day, the human rights defender was taken to the emergency unit of the Colombo National Hospital based on the recommendation of the Judi-

cial Medical Officer. Tharindu Uduwaragedara was subsequently admitted to the Colombo National Hospital for medical treatment. Later that evening of 29 July 2023, Tharindu Uduwaragedara was presented before the Colombo Chief Magistrate. Police accused the human rights defender of serious offences under the Penal Code of Sri Lanka, including unlawful assembly, public unrest and causing damage to public property. Tharindu Uduwaragedara was granted bail by the Magistrate Court the same day but was hospitalised for further treatment.

This is not the first time Tharindu Uduwaragedara has faced reprisals due to his human rights work and reporting. On 4 July 2023, he was questioned for nearly three hours by the Computer Crimes Investigation Division (CCID) of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) linked to a media briefing during which he spoke against and addressed the arrest of stand-up comedian Nathasha Edirisooriya. Tharindu Uduwaragedara and several other human rights defenders who spoke at the briefing were accused of committing contempt of court by representatives of a right-wing extremist group resulting in an inquiry against him.

On 28 June 2022, Tharindu Uduwaragedara was [interrogated](#) at the CID headquarters in Colombo, related to the content of his YouTube channel, based on a complaint filed against him by the Intelligence Division of the Sri Lanka Air Force.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the assault, abuse and arbitrary arrest of Tharindu Uduwaragedara, which it believes is a reprisal against his human rights work, and a clear obstruction of his right to report and work freely as a journalist. His treatment is part of a broader pattern of reprisals against human rights defenders and journalists peacefully voicing dissent against government policies in Sri Lanka.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Sri Lankan authorities to:

1. Immediately put an end to the ongoing harassment, including legal persecution, of Tharindu Uduwaragedara;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the assault and unlawful detention of the human rights defender, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Foster an environment where all human rights defenders can carry out their work with safety and dignity, while upholding the principles of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.