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Peoples Rights Group (PRG) Expresses Concerns **About Arbitrary Arrests and Threat to Free Expression in Sri Lanka**

PRG, a rights based advocacy and lobbying group taking up issues relating to human rights violations in Sri Lanka, expresses its serious concerns about the recent developments which impinge on the fundamental rights of the citizens, particularly the right to free expression as well as to a due process and a fair trial. Although these violations have been of a continuing nature, the recent arrests of Ramzy Razeek, a social media activist for expressing his views as well as Hejaaz Hizbullah, a former State Counsel and a prominent Sri Lankan lawyer, under dubious circumstances raise renewed fears about the declining state of rule of law in Sri Lanka. In addition, “Police Curfews” imposing COVID19 related restrictions, have also been adversely impacting on the freedom of expression.

On April 10, 2020, Police arrested Ramzi Razeek for writing a post on his Facebook wall of a need for ideological struggle against extremist ideas. Razeek has been a consistent advocate against racism and promoting communal harmony, equality and justice, as clearly seen by his other FB posts. He is in added danger of being charged under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act and the Cyber Crimes Act, which give the Police discretion to detain a person without bail. It is also a cause for worry that the Police seem to be ignoring clear guidelines on the application of hate speech law (S.3 of ICCPR) issued by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka. The arrest and ongoing detention of an award-winning writer Shakthika Sathkumara for publishing a novel considered to be defamatory of Buddhism, and of M R Mazahima, a Muslim woman for wearing a dress that allegedly had a picture similar to a Buddhist symbol were two more recent examples of misuse of the ICCPR law.

Prominent lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah was also arrested on April 14, 2020 for ‘alleged involvement in the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks’ pursuant to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and has since been kept in detention without charges or access to a lawyer for well over a month. While acknowledging the need to conduct thorough investigations into any alleged offence, it is of grave concern that Hizbullah has been denied the right to due process. The Bar Association of Sri Lanka, the International Bar Association, the International Commission of Jurists as well as Amnesty International among others have expressed their serious concern over this arbitrary detention.

Whilst the attention of the Sri Lankan and international communities is focused on the COVID19 pandemic, it is alarming that the Sri Lankan Government authorities use the opportunity to blatantly violate the rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Sri Lanka and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sri Lanka is a state party. Viewed in the backdrop of COVID related racism in the form of racial profiling of coronavirus cases and undue denial of burial rights to Muslims and some Christians, it is observed that the civil and political rights of Sri Lankans are being systemically stripped away at a rapid pace.

PRG expresses grave concern over such violations and calls on the Sri Lankan authorities to respect human rights and ensure that citizens are allowed to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, while calling upon the authorities to ensure that investigations are expeditiously conducted and concluded in accordance with due process, transparency and fair trial guarantees under international law.