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PRG Deplores the Brutal Attacks on the Peaceful Protesters and the Freedom of Expression of People of Sri Lanka

People's Rights Group (PRG), a rights based advocacy and lobbying group based in the UK particularly dealing with human rights violations in Sri Lanka, expresses its strongest concern and deep shock over the government's aggressive takeover of the protest site outside the Presidential Secretariat at Galle Face in the early hours on Friday 22nd July. This pre-dawn brutal attack carried out jointly by the Police and the armed forces, on the peaceful, unarmed protesters, was totally unwarranted, as they already announced their intention to leave the area by afternoon, following a court order. PRG totally condemns these shameful attacks carried out with vengeance, within hours of the new President Ranil Wickramasinghe being elected to power through a parliamentary vote.

According to eyewitness accounts, the attacks came as a complete surprise, with armed military and police suddenly descending on the protest camps, indiscriminately beating and assaulting the protestors and destroying their tents, after blocking and preventing access to media, lawyers and activists. These protesters have been peacefully agitating for over three months, resisting the ruling establishment in the wake of a crushing economic crisis. According to reports, the military visibly engaged in these wanton acts in anger, which saw more than 50 being injured including journalists (with one foreign media personnel) and lawyers and 9 people arrested. Lawyers who sought to intervene in their professional capacity were also reportedly prevented from doing so by security forces.

It is a matter of grave concern that the new President, given the dismal human rights records of the country's past, appears to be hell-bent on quelling dissent by initiating/authorising unlawful force and restrictions on freedom of expression and driving fear among the suffering masses through these types of attacks. This increasing trend of State initiated and sponsored human rights violations will also further penalise Sri Lanka in the eyes of the international community, especially when the need of the hour is the nation's stability and international support, ahead of an IMF bailout to address the economic crisis.

PRG therefore calls upon the President and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) to

1. ensure that security forces immediately cease illegal and unwarranted attacks on people's right to dissent
2. take action to protect the right of protesters, both in Galle Face and also in other places in Sri Lanka.
3. launch an impartial investigation into this serious development and punish those who have engaged in these assaults.
4. immediately release without charges those unlawfully detained protesters as they were detained solely for peacefully exercising their human rights.
5. desist from using emergency regulations as a pretext for more human rights violations which is deeply concerning and instead focus on solving the pressing socio- economic needs of the people with understanding and empathy and also give heed to their voices to eliminate corruption, institute accountable governance and have respect for human rights.

PRG also calls upon the international community and agencies offering assistance to address the country's economic crisis, to insist that the government respect fundamental freedoms and protect human rights impacting upon the lives of people of Sri Lanka.