

# Sri Lanka: HR groups call for release of education activists

Sunday 3 October 2021, by [RATHNAYAKE Dinitha](#) (Date first published: 29 September 2021).

**A group of human rights (HR) organisations have condemned the ongoing persecution and reprisals by Sri Lankan authorities against student leaders, labour union leaders, teachers, academics, and others involved in recent protests against the education policies in the country.**

In a joint statement issued on 28 September, leading human rights organisations called on the Sri Lankan Government to end the repression, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation against protestors advocating for education rights and peacefully expressing their dissent concerning government policy. The organisations include Amnesty International, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, the Asian Human Rights Commission, the International Federation for Human Rights, the World Organisation Against Torture, Front Line Defenders, Human Rights Watch, South Asians for Human Rights, and the Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice.

The statement, among other requests, urged the Sri Lankan authorities to release all human rights defenders and activists currently in jail, taking into consideration the risk posed by the Covid-19 pandemic to prisoners and the impact on their mental and physical health, and to thereby respect the rights of the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly, including to participate in public protests.

“Sri Lankan authorities have responded to the expression of dissent, protests, and the exercise of the rights to the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly with arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and a campaign of misinformation aimed at discrediting the work of students, teachers, academics, and union activists,” it read.

The key demands of the protests advocating for education rights since July 2021 include addressing long-standing salary anomalies of teachers and principals, and seeking the withdrawal of the Kotelawala Defence National University (KDNU) Bill which the protesters contend promotes the privatisation and militarisation of education and threatens the future of free education and the university system in Sri Lanka.

Five activists – Koshila Hansamali Perera of the People’s Movement for Free Education, Chameera Koswatte from the Workers’ Struggle Centre, Sri Jayewardenepura University Students Union President Amila Sandeepa, Inter-University Students’ Federation Convenor Wasantha Mudalige, and Rajarata University student leader Heshan Harshana – remain in detention due to their participation in a protest on 3 August 2021. They are suspected of damaging public property, causing injuries to the fingers of a policeman and violating Covid-19 regulations.

Several other activists and people connected with or supporting education rights defenders have faced arrests, threats, and intimidation. At least seven people who transported protesters and provided loudspeakers to the protest were arrested and released on bail in the same case.

On 6 August, the Thalangama Police submitted the names of a further 11 people before the Kaduwela Magistrate's Court including student leaders Udara Sandaruwan and Indika Vidanapathirana; academic Mahim Mendis; trade union leaders Dhammika Munasinghe, Chathura Samarasinghe, and Amila Sandaruwan; and activists Sujith Kuruwita, Dhanushka Kumarasinghe, Ven. Galwewa Siridhamma Thera, Ven. Tampitiye Sugathananda Thera, and Ven. Thenne Gnanaananda Thera. Although no arrest warrants have been issued, those named have suffered intimidation and threats from the Police including through multiple visits to their homes, threatening telephone calls, and the intimidation of family members. As a result, some of them have gone into hiding and have been unable to carry on their usual work or to continue to protest.

"We are especially concerned for the health and safety of the five jailed activists who have been denied bail under provisions of the Offences Against Public Property Act No. 12 of 1982 as amended," the organisations noted.

---

**Dinitha Rathnayake**

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.*

---

**P.S.**

The Morning LK

<https://www.themorning.lk/hr-groups-call-for-release-of-education-activists/>