

Sri Lanka: New government condemned over violent crackdown on protest - report



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Since the Sri Lanka protests began, police and armed forces have routinely misused tear gas and water cannons against largely peaceful protesters

Security forces have fired live ammunition, killing at least one protester

Over 140 protesters have been arrested and a further 18 have been issued with travel bans

Amnesty International's new campaign 'Protect the Protest' is challenging attacks on peaceful protest globally

'The new government in Sri Lanka has continued to use unlawful use of force, intimidation and harassment to subdue protestors - sending a chilling message that there is no room for dissent'- Yamini Mishra

The Sri Lankan authorities have fiercely clamped down on protests and demonised protesters during a period of economic crisis and hardship in the country, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

The 37-page report, Penalised for Protesting: Sri Lanka's crackdown on protestors, details how the authorities have failed to protect peaceful protesters and resorted to the excessive use of force - deploying the military to police protests, carrying out reprisals against protestors and vilifying those who dare to speak out.

“Sri Lanka has seen widespread protests over the worst economic crisis in the country’s post-independence history. “People have the right to express discontent peacefully and the state has an obligation to facilitate this right, but the Sri Lankan authorities have repeatedly and unrelentingly stifled the voice of the people. “The new government in Sri Lanka has continued to use unlawful use of force, intimidation and harassment to subdue protestors, sending a chilling message that there is no room for dissent. The right to freedom of peaceful assembly is a keystone of any rights respecting society. The Sri Lankan authorities should change course and immediately end their suppression of people’s right to protest.”

It must be noted that there have been several incidents of protester violence. But while not all protesters were peaceful, the response from the authorities must still comply with human rights laws and standards.

Since the protests began five months ago, the police and armed forces have routinely misused tear gas and water cannons against largely peaceful protesters. On two occasions, security forces fired live ammunition at protesters, killing at least one person in Rambukkana on 19 April.

Since President Ranil Wickremesinghe came into power on 21 July, over 140 protesters have been arrested, while a further 18 have been issued travel bans.

Members of Parliament and the President have repeatedly described protesters as “terrorists” and President Wickremesinghe has also labelled protesters “fascists” amid a broader pattern of demonising the protest movement.

The authorities have also implemented the draconian anti-terror Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to arrest three protesters. Amnesty has previously documented the use of this law to target and harass minorities, activists, journalists and critical voices. The PTA is in violation of international human rights law and must be repealed.

‘They want me in jail’

The authorities regularly arrest protesters without due process. The security forces often refuse to produce official identification, arrest warrants or to adequately explain the reason for arrests. Certain individuals were taken away and held for several hours at undisclosed locations. On these occasions, no confirmation of arrest was issued, nor were detainees given the opportunity to inform their relatives, friends or lawyers of their whereabouts.

One of the protestors told Amnesty: "I'm still worried that they are trying to arrest me and accuse me of things I have not committed, because they want me in jail."

These arrests, which constitute unlawful deprivation of liberty, should immediately be stopped and the authorities must carry out arrests in keeping with their obligations under the international law and standards, including the ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) which prohibits arbitrary detention and protects the right to liberty and security of person.

The authorities must also end the use of Emergency Regulations, which give sweeping powers to the police and the armed forces to search and make arrests without due process.

Another protestor, who suffered repeated harassment at the hands of the authorities, told Amnesty: "Many of us got travel bans, and surveillance and tear gas attacks and baton charged and, at times, court orders and imprisonment... The state is always protecting and only defending political power and does not stand on the side of the people."

Amnesty calls on the Sri Lankan authorities to drop all charges against those protesters who were participating peacefully in so called "unlawful assemblies". All those facing such charges must be immediately released. The authorities must also hold prompt, transparent and impartial investigations into all allegations of attacks on peaceful protesters, with support from international observers.

The right to protest is under threat across all regions of the world. Amnesty's new global campaign "Protect the

Protest” challenges attacks on peaceful protest, standing with those targeted and supporting the causes of social movements demanding human rights change.

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