

Sri Lanka: Stop using force against protestors and protect fundamental freedoms

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 29 April 2022) – The excessive use of force by security personnel on peaceful protestors in Sri Lanka on 19 April has led to the death of a peaceful protestor. FORUM ASIA strongly condemns the crackdown by Sri Lankan authorities on the peaceful protestors who were exercising their fundamental rights.

The Police's excessive and disproportionate use of force in Rambukkana, Sabaragamuwa Province on 19 April, where live bullets were fired at unarmed protestors under the pretext of dispersing them, resulted in the death of one person and injured 14 others.

'Such repressive tactics are antithetical to the constitutional guarantees of the fundamental freedom of peaceful assembly in Sri Lanka, as well as its international human rights obligations,' said FORUM-ASIA.

FORUM-ASIA has been closely monitoring the mass protests in Sri Lanka organised by the public against the country's spiraling economic crisis and the government's mishandling of it. The protests started in late March and the crackdown on protestors followed shortly after, with over 50 protestors¹ and six journalists covering the protests² arrested on 31 March. In the first week of the protests alone, some 500 protestors, including civil society activists, journalists, and students were arrested.³ Despite the arrests, threats, and acts of intimidation, the protests swelled in number and spread to different parts of the country over the past month.

FORUM-ASIA calls upon the Commission of Inquiry formed by the Ministry of Public Security and the delegation of Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka conducting investigation on this grave matter to conduct a fair and impartial investigation and regularly apprise the public of its progress.⁴

Sri Lankan authorities must cease the excessive use of force

FORUM-ASIA also calls on the Human Rights Commission to ensure the people of Sri Lanka can continue exercising their fundamental freedoms. The court proceedings⁵ in this incident will be pivotal in bringing the perpetrators to justice as the court has ordered the arrest of police officers who ordered to open fire on the protestors in Rambukkana⁶.

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/31/tear-gas-as-sri-lanka-protesters-try-to-storm-presidents-house>

² <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/sri-lanka-several-journalists-assaulted-and-detained-during-mirihana-protests.html>

³ <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/sri-lanka-several-journalists-assaulted-and-detained-during-mirihana-protests.html>; <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/5728-sri-lanka-lift-restrictions-on-fundamental-freedoms-and-investigate-violations>

⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/sri-lanka-lifts-curfew-in-rambukkana-probe-begins-on-police-firing-at-unarmed-protesters/articleshow/90973081.cms>

⁵ <https://www.dailymirror.lk/recommended-news/Unrest-in-Rambukkana-State-level-contradictions-galore-as-victims-await-justice/277-235614>

⁶ <https://www.newswire.lk/2022/04/27/rambukkana-incident-court-issues-arrest-orders/>

Given the rapidly evolving situation on the ground and the heightened possibility of violence escalating, FORUM-ASIA urges the authorities to cease the excessive use of force and calls on the authorities to allow peaceful protestors to continue without violence, fear, threat, or any other acts of intimidation. Journalists and media workers should be allowed to cover the protests without obstruction, harassment, and intimidation. Any such incident targeted toward the protestors or media workers must be thoroughly, swiftly, and transparently investigated.

‘We urge Sri Lankan authorities to ensure, protect and respect the democratic principles embedded in the Constitution of Sri Lanka, and refrain from excessive use of force against peaceful protests. We call on the international community to condemn the action of the Sri Lankan government and security forces’ said FORUM-ASIA.

‘The Sri Lankan government must find a peaceful, democratic, and rights-centric resolution to address the demands of the people. We firmly support the people of Sri Lanka who are exercising their hard-won rights to the freedom of peaceful assembly, association, and expression.’

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The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

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