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Sri Lanka: Human rights defender Joseph Stalin arrested

On 3 August 2022, Human rights defender and General Secretary of Ceylon Teachers Union, **Joseph Stalin** was arrested at his office in Colombo by a team of over 25 police officers. Authorities claim that his arrest is due to a protest carried out in May 2022 in violation of a court order. The human rights defender was taken to the Fort police station and remanded despite suffering from poor health. Joseph Stalin's arrest is part of increasing reprisals including arrests, abductions, intimidation, violence, and surveillance against peaceful protesters and human rights defenders in Sri Lanka. At the time of issuing this appeal, Stalin was being taken to the Magistrate's residence but it has not been confirmed whether he has been granted bail.

[Joseph Stalin](#) is a human rights defender, the General Secretary of Ceylon Teachers Union and a prominent advocate for education rights and reforms. He has campaigned against militarization of education in Sri Lanka and for the rights of teachers and students against regressive state polices. Since the beginning of countrywide protests linked to the economic crisis in March 2022, Joseph Stalin has been at the forefront of peaceful campaigns seeking systematic change and more transparent, accountable governance. Protesters demand an end to corruption, abolishing the executive presidency which centralizes power and for the removal of the Rajapaksa family and their allies, including current President Ranil Wickremesinghe from power. The Sri Lankan government has responded with violence, disinformation against protesters and widespread arrest of protesters and perceived leaders.

On 3 August 2022, Joseph Stalin was arrested at his office by a large contingent of uniformed police officers. Videos of his arrest show the human rights defender repeatedly asking a reason or basis for his arrest as he is not a criminal, murderer or thief. Those around him appealed to the police to be careful in their treatment of the defender as he suffered from ill health. Authorities have sought to justify the arrest on the basis of a peaceful protest in which he participated in May 2022 in violation of a court order. Others who were photographed at the protest and who have since shown allegiance to the Wickremesinghe administration have been rewarded with government positions. Joseph Stalin who has been consistent in calling for accountability and genuine system change, is being punished for his peaceful human rights activism. Previously on 25 July 2022, the Magistrates Court had issued a travel ban against Joseph Stalin and five other protesters raising fears of possible arrest. While many have been forced into hiding, Joseph Stalin has continued his advocacy, openly calling for an end to reprisals against protesters. The defender is due to be produced before the Magistrates Court on 4 August 2022, but there are no updates on his status at the time of this appeal being issued.

This is not the first time Joseph Stalin has faced reprisals for his human rights work. On 8 July 2021, Joseph Stalin was arrested along with 30 others protesting against the militarization of education in Sri Lanka. The human rights defender and other protesters were granted bail by the Colombo Magistrates Court the same day. However, despite being released on bail, Sri Lanka police, forcibly placed the defender, and others, in military-run COVID-19 quarantine centers as punishment for their activism.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the reprisals against and arrest of human rights defender Joseph Stalin and calls for an immediate end to reprisals against peaceful protesters. Dissent against regressive state policies, human rights violations, corruption and peaceful protest is not a crime and should not be punished. Human rights defenders such as Joseph Stalin are essential for

Sri Lanka's future as it seeks to overcome economic, social and political unrest. Solutions for the crisis must involve a rights centered approach that does not punish and harm human rights defenders. Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Sri Lanka to cease all harassment, violence, and reprisals against human rights defenders in the country.

Front Line Defenders urges the relevant authorities in Sri Lanka to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Joseph Stalin and drop all charges against him as they are solely motivated by his legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Immediately and unconditionally cease all attempts to threaten and harass Joseph Stalin, as these measures are not only related to his legitimate human rights activities but furthermore, constitute a violation of his rights;
3. Guarantee under all circumstances that the human rights defender is not subjected to any form of torture and other ill-treatment while in the custody of the police;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Sri Lanka are able to carry out their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, in line with Sri Lanka's international human rights obligations and commitments;
5. Initiate an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the violent attacks against peaceful and unarmed protesters in Sri Lanka with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards.

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