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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Tourner La Page, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 May 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



The promotion and protection of the right to Freedom of opinion and expression

Media freedom is fundamental issue in any functioning democracy. In the post war period the killing has reduced but physical attacks against journalists continue to take place. There were instances of offices of news organisations being attacked by mob in recent months. Many victims of the war feel disillusioned and let down by the media. The government has created structures to monitor and manipulate the media within and outside of Sri Lanka. These structures may outlive the present government. They pose a long term challenge to media freedom.

Journalists in the "North and East are subjected to serious challenges amidst severe threats to their lives and profession". Tamil journalists in particular have faced reprisals for speaking out against the abuse of rights. They have frequently found themselves targeted with surveillance, threats, acts of violence, and even death. This culture of impunity continues to put journalists and freedom of expression into serious hardship.

The Sri Lankan government continues its policy of stifling press freedom and the right to information by intimidating and harassing journalists and media houses as police and military continue their hard-line stand on targeting journalists even on flimsy reasons". Sri Lanka is currently ranked 127th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders 2021 Press Freedom Index. The government has put in place a number of measures that aim to curb internet freedom. Media activists say they are under threat from the state and ministers and officials often intimidate journalists. Independent journalists have been threatened via the state media mostly in the war torn North and East.

Tamil journalist Shanmugam Thavaseelan was on his way to cover commemoration events when he was stopped and harassed by Sri Lankan police and military officers. This incident took place on 16th of 2022, ahead of Tamil Genocide Day commemorations. The Sri Lankan state has consistently disrupted Tamil remembrance events with increased surveillance, intimidation, and violence. Even as the volatility in the South of the island continues, the Sri Lankan military seems focussed on silencing Tamil commemorations in the North-East.

On the 26th of January 2022, some of the mothers of the disappeared children joined a protest against former justice minister, Ali Sabry, in Vavuniya. They were met with violence by police officers, who are reported to have been aware of the identities of the mothers.

Tamil journalist, Murugupillai Kokulathasan, has been released on bail on 7th of march 2022 by Valaichenai Magistrate court, after being held in detention for over 470 days under the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Locally known as Kokul, the photographer attached to Batticaloa Press Club was arrested on 28th of November 2020, by the Sri Lanka's Terrorism Investigation Department (TID) and was taken to the fourth floor of the CID headquarters in Colombo, an infamous torture site over allegations that he had published pictures of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on Facebook.

While Devapratheepan was covering the demolition of a bus station on the 26th of february 2022. he was approached by Viyalendiran and some of his supporters. Devapratheepan took out his mobile phone to video the conversation but was shouted at by one of the SLPP supporters and was told not to take any videos before he was repeatedly hit. he had been threatened ,attacked and admitted to Chenkalady hospital for his injuries. He now fears for his life.

In an another incident Selvakumar Nilanthan, a Tamil journalist and Batticaloa Press Club secretary, was interrogated for two hours by officers from Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on the 13th of february 2022. Two CID officers from Eravur police station visited Nilanthan's house twice ordering Nilanthan to go to Eravur police station for questioning over his alleged links to the Tamil diaspora. This is not the first time Nilanthan has been under interrogation. In July 2020, Sri Lanka's Terrorism Investigation Department (TID) summoned Nilanthan to their Batticaloa office where they demanded Nilanthan to disclose his personal and financial details. He was asked a significant amount of questions about his accounts and the passwords and told to give full access to his Facebook account, Whatsapp account, email account, bank account and other personal details.

Also Sri Lanka's TID has continued to target a Tamil journalist and Jaffna University student, repeatedly issuing interrogation summons and harassing family and colleagues in Kilinochchi. The latest TID summons stated P. Sujeeban was required for an ongoing investigation, ordering the journalist to appear in Kilinochchi on 17th of December 2021. He has been working as a journalist for the past 5 years. He was targeted and accused of inciting terrorism by Sinhala Ravaya general secretary because of his reporting and posting on Facebook. He has not been allowed to live his life normally due to the continues harassment and investigation.

In an another incident Batticaloa police served Tamil journalist Punniyamoorthy Sasikaran with a restraining order on the 5th of february 2022, to ban him from covering a protest that the police claimed was planned against Sri Lanka's independence celebrations. The court order states that the police allegedly received intelligence that local Tamil organisations and political parties were going to attend a 12 hour march. however, local journalists reportedly said that there were not any protests planned. Sasikaran is one of many Tamil journalists who have experienced intimidation tactics and court orders by Sri Lankan authorities to prohibit

their reporting on key issues in the North-East. Last year, Sasikaran was interrogated for over two hours by Sri Lanka's Crime Prevention Unit, for allegedly organising an event in January 2021, commemorating the deaths of Indian fishermen who died at sea in 2020.

On the other hand censorship of the Tamil voices by various social medias further oppress the freedom of speech in the form of terrorism prevention act globally. Facebook threatens press and cultural freedom worldwide after the Tamil Guardian's (Major English language website that reports on Tamil affairs) Instagram account was suspended twice last year in October 2021, claiming that content had breached their 'Dangerous Individuals and Organisations policy'. It was restored after worldwide condemnation of parliamentarians but such contents are removed continuously. In another situation Instagram disabled Tamil Guardian's page without any prior warning or explanation, a move that amounts to a dangerous and unwarranted form of online censorship. Similar policies are imposed by YouTube as well.

News articles covering events on the island, historical photographs documenting Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and even political artwork, pictures of Tamil national flag or any historical materials relevant to tamil eelam, Documentaries based on decades of freedom struggles have all faced removal. Other Tamil nationalist content and accounts have also faced similar hurdles. The disabling of the accounts provoked outrage across the world, with Tamil lawmakers in the North-East joining parliamentarians in Canada and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in expressed their condemnation. this kind of blunt censorship has effectively strengthened the Sri Lankan state's repressive approach to clamping down on freedom of expression.

In the last year November the accounts of Tamils who organised heroes day "Maveerar Naal" events in memory of the civilians and soldiers who died in the Tamil Eelam war were frozen in the social media app called Clubhouse. Furthermore the Personal Accounts of tamils who kept photographs of Karthikai flowers or their respected leader as their profiles were temporarily suspended without initial warning or investigation. "In the absence of transparency, the algorithms used by Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Clubhouse to regulate their social medias can be manipulated by troll armies or "social bots" – ghost accounts designed to generate automatic messages – with the aim of getting content deleted or accounts shut down," stated by the press freedom organisation.

These kinds of draconian measures hinder Tamil and Sinhala journalists in exile who are vigorously pursuing war crime stories. Lack of media freedom undermines the ability of journalists to play a meaningful role in the reconciliation efforts. The militarisation of society, the lack of independence within the judiciary and a largely dysfunctional parliament are other factors that have an adverse impact on media freedom. This is an absolute disaster and it is a great frustration and setback for Tamils who are fighting for their right to self-determination.

Therefore we urge the UN representatives to:

- act on behalf of people who are facing obstacles and threats from multi levels to bring their extreme struggle to the spotlight;

- urge social media platforms to ensure imposing rule and laws include maximum congruence, non-discrimination and enforceability.

We also call upon those interested in press freedom, international bodies to interfere and ensure that journalists are safe and continue to their profession without any hindrance.

GLOBAL TAMIL MOUVEMENT, Association des Journalistes en Exil, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.