

Two prominent Sri Lankan Human Rights Defenders detained.

Two prominent Sri Lankan Human Rights Defenders who were detained and questioned at Kilinochchi by officials of the Police Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) on Sunday March 16th night were reportedly brought down to Vavuniya in the early hours of Monday March 17th night. They are to be transferred to Colombo for further interrogation by TID officials.



The two human rights activists, one a Sinhalese Catholic layman and the other a Tamil catholic clergyman are Mr. Ruki Fernando and Rev. Fr. Praveen Mahesan widely known as Ruki and Fr. Praveen respectively.

Ruki Fernando is currently serving as Human Rights adviser to the INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre based in Colombo. Fr. Praveen Mahesan OMI is Director of the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation (CPR) based in Jaffna. Fr. Praveen is also the parish priest of the Amaithipuran Church at Akkarayan in the Kilinochchi district. Both members of the Catholic laity and clergy respectively have been actively involved in human rights issues in general and those affecting the victims of war in particular.

Kilinochchi

Both Ruki and Fr.Praveen were reportedly on a fact –finding mission in the Tharmapuram area of Kilinochchi district when they were taken into custody by a contingent of defence officials from both the military intelligence unit of the Sri Lankan army as well as terrorism investigation division officers of the Sri Lankan Police. Unconfirmed reports stated that they were both taken into custody at Musalappitti in Tharmapuram near the home of Ms. Jeyakumari Balendra who was arrested a few days ago on charges of allegedly harbouring an absconding member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam(LTTE)

Both Ruki and Fr.Praveen were brought together to the Police station at Kilinochchi town and questioned separately by Terrorism Investigation Division(TID)officials. Though detained for investigative purposes at the Police station premises both men were not arrested formally or lodged in a cell it is learnt. One was quizzed at the Police mess while the other was “interviewed” at a building behind the main office.

The questioning was done simultaneously but separately to elicit statements from both persons about their activities in the North and then scrutinised for discrepancies in the parallel testimonies. The Questioning went on from 10. 15 pm on Sunday March 16th to 1.30 am on Monday March 17th. Over fifteen TID officials were engaged in the interrogation exercise.

Vavuniya

Thereafter both Ruki Fernando and Fr.Praveen Mahesan were reportedly taken away from the Kilinochchi Police station at about 2 am to Vavuniya for further interrogation by the TID officials. After a second round of interrogation on Monday March 17th morning both persons are scheduled to be brought to Colombo later in the day and detained under provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism act(PTA).

There was however no further information about whether they had been brought to Colombo or where exactly both were being held in Colombo at the time of writing this news report. Colleagues, friends and well-wishers of Ruki and Fr.Praveen are also in the dark about the exact situation concerning both.

There is speculation that both Ruki Fernando and Fr.Praveen Mahesan are being detained still for further interrogation at another location supervised by the TID in Vavuniya.

Upon hearing that a Catholic priest attached to the Jaffna diocese of the Roman Catholic Church had been detained at Kilinochchi the Jaffna Catholic Bishop Rt. Rev.Thomas Soundaranayagam immediately sent senior Catholic priest Rev.Fr.Paul Natchathiram to the Kilinochchi Police station to watch Fr. Praveen Mahesan and Mr.Ruki Fernando's interests.

Geneva

Police officials reportedly told Fr. Natchathiram that both Fr.Praveen and Ruki could not be released as they were to be detained in Colombo for further interrogation by the TID to ascertain whether they were involved in supplying "false information" about the human rights situation in the North of Sri Lanka to detractors of the country engaged in blackening the reputation of Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.Apparently a special unit has been created at the TID to monitor those suspected of conveying information to Geneva.

According to colleagues of Ruki Fernando they had been first alerted of the incident by Ruki himself who had texted them from his telephone 0773874160.In these text messages Ruki Fernando had disclosed that he and Fr.Praveen were being detained at Kilinochchi Police station and were being questioned separately.

When a Vavuniya based Lawyer called the Kilinochchi Police station and inquired after Ruki Fernando and Father Praveen Mahesan the lawyer was informed that no one by the names mentioned were arrested by the Kilinochchi Police or being detained there. However the police said that two persons had been arrested by a specially appointed unit of the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) and were being held at a separate location in Killinochchi.

Subsequently when another lawyer based in Vavunia called the Kilinochchi police, the lawyer was informed that Ruki Fernando and Rev. Fr.Praveen were being questioned by around 15 TID officers at the Kilinochchi Police station.

Colombo

Later on in the night, Mr.Lakshan Dias, a lawyer from Colombo spoke to the Officer in charge at Kilinochchi Mr. Kumara and inquired about Ruki and Fr.Praveen .Mr. Dias was informed that Ruki Fernando and Fr. Praveen were being questioned and a decision regarding their continued detention would be made on the following morning.

Kilinochchi police OIC Mr.Kumara told Lawyer Dias that Ruki Fernando and Rev Praveen had behaved in a suspicious manner as they had visited some families who had lost family members in the war.

Police spokesperson Senior Supdt of Police,Ajith Rohana when contacted by journalists in the morning of Monday told the press that both Ruki Fernando and Fr.Praveen Mahesan would be brought to the TID headquarters in Colombo from Vavuniya and detained on terrorism related charges under the PTA.

When asked to specify what the terrorism related charges were the Police spokesman told the media he police spokesman said that the main charges were attempting to create instability among communities and promoting separatism but declined to elaborate further.

The National Human Rights Commission has also been appraised of the fact that two human rights defenders have been detained for interrogation without any charges being specified or family members informed of their situation.

Declaration

It is pertinent in the current context to note that in 1998, after 14 years of lobbying, advocacy and negotiation, the UN General Assembly adopted the landmark Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

The adoption of the Declaration was a critical point in human rights history because it recognised in international law the extreme importance and legitimacy of human rights activity, and the need to protect it along with those who carry it out.

Also known as the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the Declaration defines a human rights defender as anyone working for the promotion and protection of human rights.

This broad definition encompasses professional as well as non-professional human rights workers, volunteers, journalists, lawyers and anyone else carrying out, even on an occasional basis, a human rights activity.

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