



Assault against prominent anti-disappearances activist must be independently investigated and universally condemned

(Washington, DC; August 16, 2017) – Mariyasuresh Easwary, a leading Tamil activist who has been campaigning against enforced disappearances in the North-East was assaulted by two men in Mullaithivu on August 14, 2017. Ms. Easwary, whose husband was disappeared by the Sri Lankan military in 2009, was travelling alone at around 8pm last night when two men approached her on a motorbike and assaulted her. They threatened her and demanded that she abandon her campaign to account for disappeared Tamils, before slapping and groping her. The men believed that the other families of the disappeared would stop protesting if she stopped her activism. The protests, which have continued nonstop for over 150 days in Mullaithivu, demand answers about the whereabouts and fates of those taken into state custody and remain a sore point for the government.

PEARL strongly condemns Monday's assault in strongest terms and calls for an immediate independent investigation into this crime. Ms. Easwary's work has been instrumental in highlighting the continuous suffering of the families of the disappeared in the Mullaithivu district. Her targeting is, sadly, no shock in light of months of surveillance of the protests in Mullaithivu. The families of the disappeared, who have sat outside the District Secretariat since March, have previously complained of state surveillance and harassment. This is a disturbing pattern that has characterized all protests related to enforced disappearances and is clearly designed to have a threatening effect on these lawful demonstrations. Despite repeated complaints by the families, the government has not acted to halt its surveillance activities. Their inaction indicates their unwillingness or inability to stop such surveillance and harassment—which are equally troubling possibilities for Tamils living against the backdrop of a significant security presence.

The latest assault is a worrying escalation of the recent increase in tensions in the North-East. The government has not addressed the rise in threatening activities by security forces since May, while judicial efforts have further stymied Tamil activism and memorialization in the past months. Tamils increasingly fear that the relative openness of the Sirisena-era, compared to the Rajapaksa-regime, is only a temporary respite, and many expect to face harsh retribution for taking advantage of the opportunity to ostensibly safely engage in political activities. History has shown the reality of this trend: many Tamils who thought they could freely protest state violence during the 2002-2006 ceasefire were killed for their activities when the war resumed. Incidents such as the attack on Ms. Easwary lend credence to the argument that Sri Lanka's transition only happened on the surface.

PEARL urges an independent investigation to examine Ms. Easwary's assault and hold the perpetrators accountable. We also call for an immediate halt to Sri Lanka's surveillance and intimidation of Tamil activists, especially the families of the disappeared who are simply seeking answers about the fates of their loved ones. Finally, we ask the United States government, other international stakeholders and southern groups to join us in strongly condemning the assault and demanding an end to Sri Lanka's use of surveillance and violence as an intimidation tactic to silence Tamil political activities.