25th May, 2017

The Right to memorialisation of Tamils & harassment of Tamil activist leading memorialisation

We, the undersigned individuals and organisations, strongly condemn the continued police harassment of Rev. Fr. Elil Rajendra, a Tamil Catholic Priest belonging to the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), based in Mullaithivu, Northern Sri Lanka.

Many of us have met and know of Fr. Elil through his human rights activism. He has been working with Tamil war survivors and families of victims, supporting their struggles and advocating for their rights. He is known for his engagement and collaboration with Sinhalese activists from other parts of Sri Lanka, inviting and hosting them in the North, and often travelling down to Colombo for dialogues. He has also been engaging with the international community and the government. Last year, he had served as the district Chairperson of the Zonal Task Force of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms, an initiative of the Sri Lankan government.

Fr. Elil was instrumental in organizing a memorial service in Mullivaikkaal on 18th May, the day and place Sri Lanka’s three decade long war came to a bloody end. This year, the memorial involved families carving names of their loved ones who had been killed in the war on stones, and placing them by a monument that was placed there on the 18th of May last year. Carving of names on stones was a way for family members to remember their killed loved ones, especially as most had no grave.

During the preparations, the organizers were subjected to regular surveillance and intimidation. Fr. Elil and the youth hired to inscribe names on the stones, were then summoned and questioned by the Police on 16th and 19th May respectively. He was summoned to the Police again on 22nd May, but was told by a senior police officer not to report to the police, but that the investigation would continue, implying that he would be subjected to continued scrutiny. A consistent demand of the police has been a full list of the names that were, and were to be carved on the stones. In the meantime, on 17th May, the police had obtained a Court Order stopping Fr. Elil and others from holding the memorial event at the pre-planned site in Mullivaikkaal. Though the Order was challenged in the court, the courts didn’t allow the event to go ahead as planned, and only allowed a memorial event to be held in the nearby church.

At the same time, the Sri Lankan government had organized a memorial service for “war heroes” on 19th May, in Colombo, with the patronage of the President. This was following a series of such events throughout the country, during the month of May, which had been named “War Heroes Month”.

The policy and practice of the present and former governments towards remembrance of the war dead and memorialisation is blatantly discriminatory towards Tamils, both dead and alive. This is a real obstacle towards peace and unity, and if continued, would only add to further polarisation and mistrust.

We affirm that all persons and communities have a right to cry and grieve for family and community members killed, to erect monuments, privately and publicly, individually and collectively. For many families and friends whose loved ones were killed, this is a way to heal their painful past, and move towards the future.

Thus, we appreciate and fully support the work of Fr. Elil and others, towards the realisation of this universal right, which is a crucial element of transitional justice and reconciliation. We express
our solidarity to them in the context of intimidation, threats and reprisals from the government that they are current facing. We see their work as crucial towards reconciliation and co-existence, and commit to support them.

We call on the government to ensure the right to remember and memorialisation of all communities, and stop the persecution of Fr. Elil and others working to realise and promote this right. We condemn the anti-reconciliation policies and actions of the government, extend solidarity and stand by Fr. Elil and others facing persecution, and extend our fullest support to them to continue their important work.

Signatories:

Individuals

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Organisations

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156. Families of the Disappeared (FoD)
157. Human Rights Office, Kandy (HRO)
158. INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre
159. International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP)
160. Mannar Social and Economic Development Organization
161. National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL)
162. National Fisheries Solidarity Organization (NAFSO)
163. Sri Lanka Campaign (SLC)