

14-09-2021

**We, the below mentioned civil society organizations and individuals, urge the government to stop the militarization of education through the Kotelawala Defense University Act and stop endangering the safety of activists who led the protests against the Act by continuing to detain them.**

We understand that the ruling party's attempt to pass the Kotelawala National Defense University (KNDU) Act in the parliament is a step towards militarizing civil space. We strongly condemn expediting the enactment of such an Act, especially amidst a pandemic and repression of student activists and university academics who oppose it. Also, we emphasize that the government should be responsible for endangering the health of the student leaders who led the protests against the Act by imprisoning them on false charges during a pandemic.

As civil society stakeholders, we have continuously advocated protecting the democratic space, human rights, the rule of law, and reconciliation in this country. This is not the first time we have protested the attempts of militarization of the civil space. We have continually paid attention to the increasing militarization responses, especially with the appointment of task forces consisting of military leaders and members for fields such as agriculture, education, conservation of cultural heritage and health, after the current government came to power. We extend our support to the people's struggle against the efforts for the militarization of education.

We have observed that the content of this Act is a sharp attempt at the militarization of education.

According to the proposed KNDU Act, Kotelawala Defense University becomes an independent university entirely controlled by the Defense Ministry and the military, which is not accountable to the 1978 University Act. Currently, Sri Lanka's state university system is controlled by the University Grants Commission (UGC). However, with the enactment of the proposed KNDU Act, a parallel military university system with equal powers to the UGC will be created. That university system is governed by a governing body consisting of senior officials from the Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces.

In this military structure, our observation is that the Act contains provisions that make students entirely subject to military discipline. "When the minister is of the view that any situation within the university tends to endanger national security or thereby tend to undermine the proper functioning of the university, the minister can direct the board to take such action as he may deem necessary to control the situation."

We opine that this affirms that students who enter this system are completely deprived of the opportunity for student activism, which they would enjoy in a democratic context.

All stakeholders, including university students, have the right to protest this, and we oppose any attempt to suppress the university academics and student activists who led the dissent. Many incidents of arbitrary arrests and grilling of student activists and academics on false charges have been reported.

Wasantha Mudalige, the Inter-University Students' Federation convener, who was involved in the protest at Parliament Road on August 3rd, was arrested while returning from a discussion programme on Sirasa TV on the night of August 5th. Student activists Chameera Koswaththa and Koshila Hansamali, who were involved in the protests, were also arrested. Amila Sandeepa, the President of the Jayawardhanapura University Students' Union, was also abducted and arrested. Lecturer Aminda Lakmal reported on social media an incident of attempting to arrest a person by someone in civilian clothes in a bus, which was transporting a group of people returning from a protest against the Act. We also draw attention to the attempts made to suppress the activists who are actively involved in the struggle of the teachers and the principals.

In our observation, most of these arrests were made under false charges of violating the quarantine laws. Student activists have been denied bail, accusing them of damaging public property by setting fire to a coffin model during the protest.

It was informed that student leaders Wasantha Mudalige, Chameera Koswaththa, and Amila Sandeepa, who were imprisoned in that way, had been infected with the Covid-19 virus in prison. We strongly emphasize that the government must take responsibility for endangering their lives due to the irresponsibility of the authorities. It is necessarily the government's responsibility to ensure the healthcare, security, and welfare of the persons who are in state custody.

We strongly emphasize that the pandemic is not a license given to the government to neglect the rights of the people.

We urge the government to repeal the KNDU Act, which has not been tabled in the parliament, and not deprive the people of their right to protest and express their views. Also, we urge immediate action to release the detained student leaders and other activists.

## **Organizations**

1. Anuradhapura District Citizen Committee
2. Asia Lanka Social Development Cooperation
3. Center for Community Empowerment, Batticaloa.
4. Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)
5. Centre for Society and Religion
6. Civil Society Solidarity Centre
7. Eastern Social Development Foundation (ESDF)
8. Environment and Community Development Information Centre (ECDIC)

9. Families Of the Disappeared
10. Food Information Action Network- FIAN Sri Lanka
11. Human & Environment Links Progressive Organization (HELP-O)
12. Human Rights Office, Kandy
13. INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre
14. Institute Social Development (ISD)
15. Janawaboda Kendraya
16. Lanka Organic Agriculture Movement (LOAM)
17. Law and Society Trust
18. Lawyers for Democracy
19. Movement for National Land and Agriculture Reform (MONLAR)
20. Movement for Plantation Peoples' Land Rights (MPPLR)
21. Muslim Women's Development Trust
22. National convener -National Fisheries Solidarity Movement
23. National Peace Council
24. Organization of Environment and Children Rights Preservation OECRP
25. Partners in Alternative Training (PALTRA)
26. PEF Sri lanka
27. People's Alliance for Right to Land (PARL)
28. RED Organization
29. Right to Life Human Rights Centre (R2L)
30. Rights Now Collective for Democracy
31. Rural Development Planning Organization (RDPO)
32. SAFE Foundation
33. Samadana
34. Savisthri National Womens' Movement
35. Social Institute for Development of Plantation Sector (SIDPS)
36. Sri Lanka Brief
37. Sri Lanka Nature Group
38. St John's Church, Uranee, Batticaloa
39. Standup Movement Lanka
40. University of Peradeniya
41. Upcountry Civil Society Collective (UCSC)
42. UPSAC Sri Lanka
43. Uva Shakthi Foundation
44. Vikalpa
45. Viluthu--Centre for Human Resource Development
46. Women Development Organization
47. Women for Justice and Peace in Sri Lanka
48. Women's Action for Social Justice (WASJ) Net Work.
49. Women's Action Network

## **Individuals**

50. Anithra Varia
51. Anushaya Collure
52. Aruna Shantha Nonis
53. Ashila Dandeniya
54. B.Gowthaman, Attorney at law
55. Buhary Mohamed
56. Chaminda Piyasekara
57. Chandra Devanarayana
58. Chathura Walivitiya
59. D.A Saman Hamangoda
60. D.M. Nimal Disanayake
61. Dinushika Dissanayake, Attorney-at-Law
62. Fr. Jeevantha peiris
63. Fr. Nandana Manatunga -
64. Fr. Rohan Silva
65. Fr.M.Sathivel
66. Herman Kumara
67. Ian Ferdinands
68. J.A.N.N.Priyantha Fernando
69. Jagath Siriwardana
70. Jayani Abeysekara
71. Jayanthi Kuru-Utumpala
72. Jayasiri Jayasekara
73. Jehan Jegadeesan
74. Jehan Perera
75. Joanne Senn
76. Juwairiya Mohideen
77. K,S,Ratnavale , Attorney at law
78. K. Ajith Hadley Perera
79. K. J. Brito Fernando
80. L.W.R Wickramasinghe
81. Lal Wijenayake
82. Lucille Abeykoon
83. Maithreyi Rajasingam,
84. Marisa de Silva
85. N. Harsha Jayarathna,
86. N. Sukirtharaj,
87. Nadesan Suresh
88. Nadie Kammallaweera

89. Nagulan Nesiah
90. Nalini Rathnarajah
91. Niroshan Ekanayaka
92. Niyanthini Kadirgamar
93. P.Muthulingam
94. P.N.Singham
95. Peter Rezel
96. Prabodha Rathnayaka, Attorney-at-Law
97. Prof. Arjuna Parakrama
98. Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda
99. Puni Selvaratnam
100. Raman Sanjay Gandhi
101. Rev. Rajan Rohaan,
102. Rev.Andrew Devadason
103. Rev.Dr. Jayasiri Peiris
104. Rev.Reid Shelton Fernando
105. Ruki Fernando
106. Ruwan Laknath Jayakody
107. S. Balakrishnan
108. S. Ratnajeewan H. Hoole
109. S. Visvalingam
110. S.C.C.Elankovan,
111. S.Sandanam
112. Sachitha Nandajith
113. Sampath Samarakoon
114. Sarala Emmanuel
115. Shereen Saroor
116. Suchith Abeyewickreme
117. Sunanda Deshapriya
118. Suren D. Perera,
119. Swasthika Arulingam, Attorney-at-Law
120. Thilak Kariyawasam
121. Tisaranlee Gunasekara
122. Udaya Kalupathirana
123. Vadivel Rameshananthan,
124. Vasuky Rajendra
125. Viboo Balakrishnan
126. Visakha Tillekeratne,