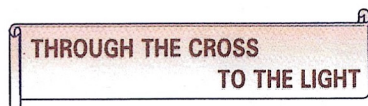
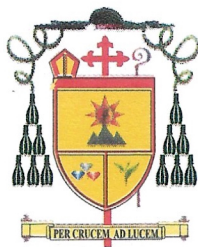


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4<sup>th</sup> August 2022

### **APPEAL TO STOP REPRESSION AGAINST FR. JEEVANTHA PEIRIS AND OTHER PROTESTERS**

As the Bishop, priests and religious of the Catholic Diocese of Rathnapura (Sabaragamuwa Province), we are extremely concerned about allegations, threats of arrests and reports of travel bans against one of our beloved priests, Rev. Fr. Amila Jeevantha Peiris.

Fr. Jeevantha has been serving in a very isolated parish in our Diocese, where most parishioners and people are rubber estate workers. True to the calling of Jesus, Fr. Jeevantha has sought to bring the good news to the poor, whose rights to education, health, housing, reasonable wages and identity have been continuously violated. He has also reached out beyond his parish to understand and support struggles for rights and justice of people in different parts of the country, including of war affected communities in Northern Sri Lanka. Understanding the structural and systemic nature of the problems affecting the poor in his parish and other parts of the country, he had ventured to actively participate in the Janatha Aragalaya (known as Aragalaya or People's Struggle), from the Galle Face Green in Colombo. During the last few months, we have been in touch with him, met him and supported him in his mission, which we considered to be part of his Priestly mission in service of God. Fr. Jeevantha had privately and publicly insisted on peaceful struggle even in the face of violent repression and sought consensus amongst diverse persons and groups, coming from different experiences and ideologies. His involvement had been an encouragement to protesters, especially other religious leaders and youth.

We are extremely concerned about visits by various police officers to churches in our diocese and to Fr. Jeevantha's parent's residence, asking about him, implying he is implicated in some crimes and on one occasion, informing a priest that there are orders to arrest him from Colombo. We are also concerned to see media reports of overseas travel bans being imposed on Fr. Jeevantha and several others involved in protests. No official arrest warrant, notice to appear to make a statement at a police station or court order banning overseas travel as a suspect has been formally served on Fr. Jeevantha to date.

We are also alarmed at reports of a series of arrests of those involved in the Aragalaya, some of which had been carried out in abduction style. The promulgation of emergency regulations by the president and its approval by parliament has conferred excessive powers to police and military and has set legal stage to severely curtail rights and freedoms of citizens. We are conscious that emergency regulations and other laws have been used in past to repress dissent and against ethnic and religious minorities.

There have been well planned vicious attacks on peaceful protests, such as on 31st March in Mirihana, 9th May and 22nd July at the Galle Face. In our own Diocese of Ratnapura, police shooting during a spontaneous protest due to fuel crisis led to a death of one person in Rambukkana on 19th April and thugs had destroyed a peaceful protest site in Embilipitiya on 20th July. We remain committed to the ideals and actions of peaceful people's protests. We have appraised and sought advice of church leaders, other religious leaders, senior lawyers and others about the evolving situation. In the meantime, we will continue to pray and extend practical support and protection to Fr. Jeevantha and all those who are facing repression.

As our people continue to die at queues for fuel, incidents of murder are reported regularly and bodies continue to be washed up on beaches, the government seems intent on continuing on a path of repression of protests and protesters. We worry that this authoritarian and insensitive approach in dealing with the massive economic and political crisis may lead to more discontent and might hamper the international assistance, which are often contingent on respect for rule of law and human rights.

We demand the government to protect the fundamental right of peaceful struggle as accepted by H. E. the President in Parliament on 3<sup>rd</sup> August and provide immediate relief to economic problems, adopt sustainable, people friendly pro-poor economic policies for long term

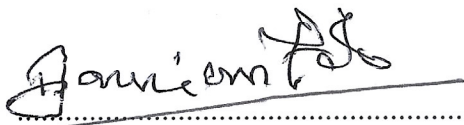
recovery, install a multi-party interim government and hold elections to establish a government with the mandate of the people.



+ Rt. Rev. Dr. Cletus C. Perera O.S.B.

Bishop of Ratnapura (Sabaragamuwa Province)





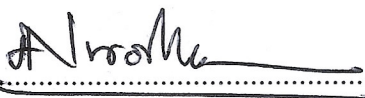
Very Rev. Fr. Damian Fernando

Vicar General



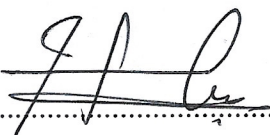
Rev. Fr. Milton Wickramasinghe

Chancellor



Rev. Fr. Niroshan Vaz

Judicial Vicar



Rev. Fr. Ayala Indika Fernando

Procurator General