



CPA Statement on allegations against State Minister of Prison Management and Prisoners' Rehabilitation

15th September 2021, Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) is deeply disturbed by [media reports](#) of two incidents this week where the State Minister of Prison Management and Prisoners' Rehabilitation Lohan Ratwatte is alleged to have abused his position by entering two prisons inebriated and attempted to assault remand prisoners. On Sunday 12 September, the State Minister is reported to have entered the Welikada Prison with a group of friends. Subsequently he is reported to have travelled by helicopter to Anuradhapura where he had entered the Anuradhapura Prison and ordered two suspects at gunpoint to kneel down in front of him. Both these incidents reflect the alarming trend of flaunting political office for personal gratification, the callousness and disregard for the rights of prisoners and human dignity, the use of arms to threaten individuals and the contempt for the rule of law in Sri Lanka. In light of the serious nature of these incidents, CPA calls for the immediate resignation of the State Minister, for the authorities to initiate a credible investigation into the incident, and action taken without fear or favour.

CPA also notes that such incidents occur against the background of previous incidents of violence including several prison riots which led to the deaths of inmates with no known domestic process of accountability. This is compounded by past incidents of violence linked to the State Minister including his alleged [involvement](#) in the murder of ten Muslim youth in Udathalawinne in 2001 where he and several others were indicted for the murders but subsequently acquitted. In such a context of impunity, there are genuine fears of evidence tampering and witness intimidation that will undermine an independent process meant to investigate and hold perpetrators accountable. These speak to the setbacks with justice in multiple emblematic cases and the urgent need for structural reforms in Sri Lanka.

These two incidents occurred whilst Sri Lanka's human rights record is being discussed at the ongoing 48th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). In fact, the incidents occurred on the eve of the Government of Sri Lanka's [response](#) to the oral update of the High Commissioner for Human Rights with the Government claiming that they are "*committed to achieving tangible progress on the entire range of issues relating to accountability, reconciliation, human rights, peace and sustainable development*". Inability at this critical juncture to take swift and firm action related to these two incidents, among many others, will send a clear message that the Government of Sri Lanka has no genuine intention of following through with its own statements and further reinforce reports by victims and civil society of the repressive climate and impunity in Sri Lanka. This is also days prior to the commencement of the United Nations General Assembly session where President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is tipped to participate, providing an opportunity for Member States of United Nations and the office of the United Nations Secretary General to raise concerns about the deteriorating human rights situation and entrenched impunity in Sri Lanka and the need for Sri Lanka to uphold the values enshrined in the United Nations Charter.