

**DUBLIN**

Front Line Defenders – Head Office  
First Floor, Avoca Court  
Temple Road, Blackrock  
Co. Dublin, A94 R7W3, Ireland

info@frontlinedefenders.org  
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +353 1 212 3750  
fax +353 1 233 8695

**BRUSSELS**

Front Line Defenders – EU Office  
Square Marie-Louise 72  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium

euoffice@frontlinedefenders.org  
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +32 2 230 9383  
fax +32 2 230 0028

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### **Statement - India: Arrest of human rights defender Arul Arumugam and judicial harassment of key leaders of farmers movement in Tamil Nadu**

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the arrest of human rights defender **Arul Arumugam** by the Tamil Nadu police on 4 November 2023, as well as his continued incarceration under multiple First Information Reports (FIRs) and preventive detention under the regressive Goonda's Act in Tamil Nadu. The human rights defender and 20 farmers/community leaders were arrested in connection with their involvement in a peaceful protest against the forcible acquisition of land by the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) in the Tiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu. Arul Arumugam is currently being held in the Palayamkottai Central Prison, Tamil Nadu.

[Arul Arumugam](#) is a human rights defender from Tamil Nadu State and a vocal advocate on the rights of farmers and local communities impacted by development related displacement - especially the violation of rights to land and livelihood. Since 2 July 2023, local farmers have been engaged in a peaceful [protest](#) against the acquisition of 3,174 acres of wetlands by SIPCOT for an industrial park. The land to be acquired by SIPCOT stretches over nine agricultural villages, meaning its dispossession could severely impact the livelihood of the farmers who use the land for crop cultivation. Instead of engaging in a meaningful dialogue with the farmers regarding their concerns, the government of Tamil Nadu has responded with a crackdown on their peaceful protest and the criminalisation of human rights defenders and leaders associated with it.

On 4 November 2023, at around 1am, the Tamil Nadu police arrested 21 farmers, including human rights defender Arul Arumugam. The farmers had been voicing their opposition to the acquisition of land by SIPCOT. The human rights defender and assembly of farmers were arrested under the FIR 324/23 filed at Anakkavoor Police station which includes offences related to obstructing a public servant from discharging their functions, disturbing public order, preventing people from voluntarily selling land to the government, and damaging public assets. The FIR was filed on 29 August 2023 when human rights defender Arul Arumugam and farmers were walking together to attend a public hearing organised by the Tiruvannamalai district administration. They were obstructed by the police en route to the hearing and were charged with unlawful assembly and other related offences. Multiple FIRs have been filed against the farmers and Arul Arumugam between July and September 2023.

On 14 November 2023, senior civil society activists [wrote](#) to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu demanding the immediate release of the arrested farmers and leaders of the protest.

In a disturbing development, on 15 November 2023, police invoked the Goonda's Act 1982 against seven of those arrested, including human rights defender Arul Arumugam. The Tamil Nadu Prevention of Dangerous Activities of Bootleggers, Drug Offenders, Goonda's, Immoral Traffic Offenders, Forest Offenders, Sand Offenders, Slum-Grabbers and Video Pirates Act, 1982 – commonly referred to as the Goondas Act – is a draconian preventive detention law which makes it difficult to obtain bail through court. While charges under the Goonda's Act were subsequently withdrawn against six of the farmers, human rights

defender Arul Arumugam continues to be detained under the regressive preventive detention law.

On 20 November 2023, the 20 farmers and leaders arrested in the context of the protest movement were granted conditional bail by the Tiruvannamalai District Court. There is concern that the arrest, multiple charges, and invoking of the preventive detention law were aimed at pressuring the farmers to stop their protest and silence those speaking out peacefully against rights violations in the area. A complaint filed to the National Human Rights Commission of India regarding the wrongful arrests and continued incarceration of human rights defender Arul Arumugam was dismissed by the Commission on 30 November 2023, directing the Superintendent of Police of Tiruvannamalai district to take appropriate action.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the repression of the peaceful protests by farmers in Tamil Nadu and the continued incarceration of human rights defender Arul Arumugam in reprisal for his peaceful and legitimate human rights work. We call upon the authorities in India to immediately release Arul Arumugam and quash the fabricated charges against him and the 20 other leaders of the protest.