

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 18, 2014 at 11:50am

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## Human rights organizations press Sri Lanka to release activist, priest

by N.J. Viehland

NCR Today

**Manila, Philippines** — Leading Asian and global human rights groups denounced the Sri Lanka government's "arbitrary arrest and detention of prominent human rights defenders," including an Oblate priest, saying those actions "attempt to silence criticism and divert the spotlight from ongoing abuses."

Amnesty International, Forum Asia, Human Rights Watch, the International Crisis Group, and the International Commission of Jurists issued the joint statement demanding the release of Ruki Fernando of the Colombo-based INFORM and Fr. Praveen Mahesan, a Catholic priest, who were arrested Sunday in Kilinochchi, the former headquarters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist group that lost the civil war that claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Mahesan, a member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, used to direct the Center for Peace and Reconciliation in Jaffna.

Their arrests came as the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva prepared to tackle a draft resolution sponsored by the United States, United Kingdom, Mauritius, Montenegro and Macedonia calling for an international investigation into "past abuses and to examine more recent attacks on journalists, human rights defenders and religious minorities."

Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapaksa rejected calls for an independent probe of alleged human rights violations during the final phase of the war in 2009.

In a telephone interview with *NCR* in January, Fernando said he supports an international intervention in probing civil war rights violations. It is something "we cannot do without."

While "truth-seeking is essential to reconciliation," that truth will remain elusive if left to the government-appointed and "controlled" probers. "The culprit and the judge are the same," Fernando said.

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