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**Press Release**

**People's Watch condemns the police action to prevent the right to freedom of assembly in Kanyakumari district**

People's Watch vehemently condemns the orchestrated enthusiasm of the Kanyakumari district police in registering criminal cases against the fishermen and their associates who have only been demanding the Tamil Nadu Government's intervention in effectively searching for their family members who are lost in mid sea in the aftermath of 'okky' cyclone. The police have registered criminal cases against several thousands of fishermen leaders including their spiritual leaders such as the Parish priests and civil society leaders like Mr. S.P. Udaya kumar and Thirumurugan Gandhi.

The right to freedom of expression also includes the right to participation in spontaneous protests when such natural disasters leading to several hundreds of missing fishermen arise and when there is demonstrable inaction or delayed action on the part of the Government and its instrumentalities. All the protest movements of the past few days have solely been against the total callousness and willful negligence of the Indian navy, the coastal guard, the marine police and the fisheries department who failed to undertake effective measures to search for the lost fishermen immediately. It is a shame therefore that the police had resorted to the filing of cases against such large sections of people against their pleading voices bleeding for their loved ones, solely due to the state's negligence.

People's Watch further condemns the torture and atrocious treatment met out by the Kanyakumari District Police to the members of 'Makkal Adhigaram' who were only pasting posters in connection with the people's protest in the district. Freedom of assembly is a vital part of democracy and when the state machinery uses its police force to deny the rights of large sections of people to bring their grievances before the elected leaders responsible for governance. This only points out that democracy is at crossroads in the state.

People's Watch notes with concern that the Chief Minister's visit to Kanyakumari district today has only resulted due to the continued protest of the fishermen in the past few days and the raison d'être of people's peaceful, continuous and passionate voices of protest.

People's Watch also condemns the statement of Mr. H.Raja of the BJP publicly stating that these protest are lead by religious leaders. We pity his ignorance in not knowing the culture of the fishermen community in Kanyakumari district where communities of fisher people are normally led by their Parish Priests who are not only the spiritual leader of the local community but they also lead other social aspects of the lives of fishermen who belong to the Christian faith.

Registering of criminal cases against genuinely protesting sections of society is antithesis to democracy and a genuine regime that respects rights of people. The registering of such cases against the participation of large sections of people in peaceful assemblies shows that they prefer to serve 'their masters' instead of serving the people whom they are to protect.

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