LST seeks information on procedure related to quarantining protestors

Colombo — 13.07.2021 — Yesterday, the Law & Society Trust (LST) submitted two sets of Right-to-Information (RTI) requests to relevant authorities seeking information on the criteria and procedures adopted in forcibly committing citizens to quarantine. LST is concerned that many people were forcibly quarantined after being arrested for engaging in peaceful protest on matters of compelling public interest. Because of the impact of forcible quarantining on the personal liberty of peaceful protestors, LST requested the relevant government agencies to make the information available within 48 hours of receiving the RTI request, as per the provisions of the RTI Act.

The first set of requests, addressed to Sri Lanka Police, Department of Health Services and the Office of the Provincial Director of Health Services (Western Province) respectively, sought information on the identities of the health services and police officials involved in sending the group of individuals arrested on 8.7.2021 from Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte to be quarantined forcibly. The request further sought access to any communications taking place between the relevant officials, both prior to and after transporting the arrested individuals to the relevant quarantine centre. The requests additionally sought information on the total number of police officers also committed to quarantine after being involved in the arrests of the protesting individuals.

The second set of requests, addressed to Sri Lanka Police and the Department of Health Services respectively, sought information on any guidelines or standard operating procedures adopted in committing individuals to be quarantined forcibly, including the designations of any officials who may order the same, the form on which such an order is made, who may transport individuals to quarantine centres, etc. While LST has requested the information sought to be released within forty-eight hours, LST will keep the public informed of the outcome of the requests, in addition to appealing to the Right to Information Commission of Sri Lanka where it becomes necessary.

LST notes with grave concern the alarming trend of repressing voices critical of the government through quarantine procedures. While enforced quarantining maybe important as a measure to protect public health during the ongoing pandemic of Covid-19, LST condemns in unequivocal terms the abuse of quarantine procedures for purposes unrelated to public health. Not only does this trend violate the fundamental rights of Sri Lankan citizens, it places additional burdens on citizens during a period when the economy is already subject to stresses and strains. It also imposes unnecessary burdens on the public health administration system which is already facing daunting challenges in keeping the Sri Lankan public safe from the pandemic. As such, it is vital that authorities make public clear guidelines on the criteria and procedures to be followed when ordering a citizen to be quarantined forcibly.

LST calls on all Sri Lankans to remain vigilant against the violation of fundamental rights of Sri Lankan citizens.