



May 3, 2022

**International coalition of organizations calls on authorities and telecom providers in Sri Lanka to maintain unhindered access to the internet for all**

His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka

CC:

Mr. Jayanth De Silva, Chairperson, Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka

General G.D.H. Kamal Gunaratne (Retd), Secretary, Ministry of Defence

The Chairperson and Members of the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA)

Your excellency,

Respected Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, Chairperson and Members of the TRCSL, Chairperson and Members of the ICTA:

We, the undersigned organizations, and members of the [#KeepItOn coalition](#) — a global network of over 280 organizations from 105 countries working to end internet shutdowns<sup>1</sup> — write to urgently appeal to you, the Government of Sri Lanka and all relevant authorities, to maintain unfettered access to the internet for all, and to protect people’s fundamental rights and freedoms even in times of protests. As people’s [human rights hang in the balance](#) amid the ongoing economic crisis, with [attempts to exercise free speech being met with violence](#), **an open, secure, reliable, and accessible internet is vital to mitigate harms to human rights.**

On April 3, the Sri Lankan Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, on the orders of the Ministry of Defence, [shut down social media services](#), in response to widespread public protests against the president’s declaration of a state of emergency. This is not the first time authorities in Sri Lanka have disrupted access to social media platforms during high tension national events. In 2019, the government [banned](#) social media platforms, in the aftermath of deadly coordinated attacks on hotels and churches across the country.

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<sup>1</sup> An internet shutdown is defined as an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information. See more at: <https://accessnow.org/keepiton>.



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## **Internet shutdowns harm human rights, exacerbate crises, and stop the free flow of information**

Research shows that [internet shutdowns result in an increase in violence](#). Shutting down the internet during a [deadly pandemic](#) adds fuel to the fire, and cuts off access to vital, timely, and life-saving information, and to emergency services. Blocking access to the internet and social media platforms during critical moments endangers people's lives and amounts to a [collective punishment](#), depriving people of fundamental rights and weakening democracy, which cannot be justified as a tactical response. If shutdowns are ordered, it is an indication of a desire to repress the exercise of freedoms and to perpetrate human rights abuses under communications disruptions. All authorities and government officials in Sri Lanka are under an obligation to push back against such orders in the interest of safeguarding rights, and enabling a free and open democratic society.

Shutdowns violate human rights such as freedom of expression and opinion, access to information, freedom of the press, and freedom of peaceful assembly. By disrupting the flow of information, shutdowns exacerbate existing tensions, potentially instigate or conceal violence and human rights violations perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, and spur the spread of misinformation. Further, shutdowns interfere with all aspects of people's daily lives including their ability to express views and opinions freely, communicate with their loved ones during crises, obtain education and healthcare, and conduct business activities. They also make it [extremely difficult](#) for journalists and the media to carry out their work, thereby denying people both inside and outside of the country access to credible information.

Additionally, imposing internet shutdowns interfere with people's livelihoods and cost nations [billions of dollars](#) as businesses, companies, public and private institutions lose huge sums of money during shutdowns. These are costs that the people of Sri Lanka have made clear that they are unwilling to bear at this moment of deep economic crisis.

## **Internet shutdowns contravene international laws**

Sri Lanka has ratified regional and international frameworks such as the legally-binding [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), which - alongside the Constitution of Sri Lanka - provide for the protection and promotion of the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, assembly, and access to information — both offline and online. The Government of Sri Lanka must also pay heed to [United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 47/16](#), “strongly condemning the use of Internet shutdowns to intentionally and arbitrarily prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information.”



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### **Telecom companies must respect human rights**

Telecommunications and internet service providers are under an obligation to push back against orders to restrict access pursuant to the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#) to respect human rights, prevent or mitigate potential harms, and provide remedy for harms they cause or contribute to operate.

**We respectfully call upon all public authorities in Sri Lanka and telecommunications providers operating in the country to refrain from taking any future actions in the days ahead that would interfere with internet access, and for the telecommunications regulator to cease accepting unlawful, disproportionate orders that hamper connectivity.**





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## ORGANIZATIONS

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Access Now  
Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)  
Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)  
Africa Open Data and Internet Research  
Foundation (AODIRF)  
African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)  
Amnesty International  
ARTICLE 19  
Association for Progressive Communications  
(APC)  
Beam Reports  
Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE)  
Blueprint for Free Speech  
Collaboration on International ICT Policy for  
East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)  
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)  
Common Cause Zambia  
Digital Rights Kashmir  
Freedom House  
Hashtag Generation  
Innovation for Change (I4C) South Asia  
International Press Centre (IPC)  
Internet Bolivia Foundation  
Internet Protection Society (Russia)  
JCA-NET(Japan)  
Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet)  
Kijiji Yeetu  
Manushya Foundation  
Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)  
Media Matters for Democracy, Pakistan  
Namibia Media Trust  
Open Net (Korea)  
OpenNet Africa  
OPTF LTD  
Organization of the Justice Campaign  
Paradigm Initiative (PIN)  
PEN America  
Ranking Digital Rights  
Samuelson-Glushko Canadian Internet Policy  
and Public Interest Clinic (CIPPIC)  
SMEX  
The Nubian Rights Forum  
Ubunteam  
WITNESS  
Women ICT Advocacy Group (WIAG)  
Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

For more information, please contact:

**Felicia Anthonio** | #KeepItOn Campaign Manager | [felicia@accessnow.org](mailto:felicia@accessnow.org)