



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Fr Stan Swamy ill with suspected Covid-19

84-year-old Jesuit gravely ill in prison with “headache, fever and cough”

Fr Stan Swamy SJ, the 84-year-old Jesuit, activist and defender of the rights of indigenous peoples who was incarcerated on 9th October 2020 in Talaja prison, Mumbai, is now ill with the symptoms of Covid-19.

Fr Swamy, who has advanced Parkinson’s disease and is hearing impaired, is in an overcrowded prison in which several staff are reported to have the virus. He is one of a group of activists and human rights defenders who have been falsely accused of links with extremist Maoist group. Talaja prison is overcrowded and has no medical staff, except for one Ayurvedic practitioner.

Fr Swamy has not been tested or vaccinated despite being 84 years old. Visits to prisoners have been stopped and only three-minute phone calls are allowed once a week. Joseph Xavier SJ, a friend of his said that in a telephone conversation on Saturday 14th May, Fr Swamy said: *“I feel bad, I have a severe headache, fever and cough. I feel very weak.”*

Fr Joseph Xavier was “very alarmed” by this, saying of Fr Swamy, whom he has known for many years:

“He never complains about anything. In the six months that he has been in prison, he has never complained, despite the obvious difficulties. It is not easy, but I manage, he used to say... However, in this last conversation, he said, ‘I have to tell you that I do not feel well. I feel very weak, very fragile.’ What is happening is a matter of grave concern. I call on the State and prison authorities to recognise that they cannot afford to provide medical treatment for the detainees. We will take over and look after them.”

Fr. Xavier Jeyaraj, Secretary for Social Justice and Ecology, adds: *“The Society of Jesus is deeply anxious about the deteriorating health of Fr. Stan Swamy and all other accused in the BK-16 case. We earnestly appeal to all concerned authorities in India to consider the health of Fr. Stan and other prisoners a priority and release them without any delay. Even when the multi-speciality hospitals have not been able to provide proper health care, how can the prisons do? Keeping them in congested prisons during the pandemic would be a criminal injustice and a murder of collective judicial conscience.”*

FAMILIES OF ACTIVIST GROUP

Families of the activists have denounced the appalling conditions in India's Talaja prison due to the Covid-19 pandemic and demand their immediate release, calling their imprisonment “a death sentence.” The group includes human rights defenders, intellectuals, lawyers, academics, people in high profile positions in Indian civil society, and advocates of minority rights.

Given the health emergency and the obvious risk to the detainees' health, relatives are calling for their release, at least temporarily, so that they can obtain the necessary care at home or in hospital, if necessary. Relatives and

friends of the 16 activists and human rights defenders complain that the detainees are not being tested and vaccinated, despite the advanced age of many of them. *"There is no plan in place. Even the prison staff is being infected. It seems that in prison, life has no value,"* says Dr Jenny Rowena, the wife of Dr Hany Babu, who was diagnosed positive for Covid and has a severe eye infection.

BACKGROUND TO FR SWAMY ACTIVISM AND ARREST

Fr Stan Swamy has worked for more than 40 years to defend the rights to land and resources of the *Adivasis* or indigenous communities in the Indian state of Jharkhand. Together with other organisations, he documented in a study how young indigenous activists were imprisoned and languished in jail for years without trial on charges under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), a law that has led to the arrest of more than 5000 people under the nationalist Narendra Modi government. Many of those imprisoned are minority rights defenders, accused of conspiring against the government or having links with extremists and Maoists.

Fr Swamy has always strongly denied the accusations against him. In a [video](#) message recorded two days prior to his arrest, he said: *"What is happening to me is not something unique happening to me alone. It is a broader process that is taking place all over the country... Many activists, lawyers, writers, journalists, student leaders, poets, intellectuals, and others who stand for the rights of Adivasis, Dalits, and the marginalized and express their dissent to the ruling powers of the country are being targeted and put into jail."*

ADVOCACY BY JESUIT NETWORK AND UN SPECIAL RAPORTEURS

In a recent [statement](#) by the Jesuit [Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat](#), following Fr Swamy's detention, the Society of Jesus and a number of civil society groups campaigned, mobilized and advocated throughout India and worldwide for his release and the release of the 15 others who have been incarcerated since 2018.

In a [press release](#) on October 20, 2020, UN **High Commissioner for Human Rights**, Michelle Bachelet expressed her concern about the case of Fr Swamy and urged the Indian authorities *"to release people charged under the **Unlawful Activities Prevention Act** for simply exercising basic human rights that India is obligated to protect."* On November 3rd, 2020, the United Nations Vice-Chair of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues released a [statement](#) raising concerns over the arbitrary detention and harassment of Fr Swamy in response to his peaceful human rights work.

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