

Sri Lankan government bans three newspapers under emergency powers

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The Sri Lankan government shut down two of the country's widest-circulating weekly newspapers on Monday, accusing them of publishing articles without permission. Officials declared that the English-language weekend paper, the *Sunday Leader*, and the Sinhala-language *Sunday Peramuna* had violated recently-imposed censorship laws.

Three days earlier, on May 19, the government banned the *Uthayan* paper, a Tamil daily based in Jaffna, the capital of the island's war-ravaged northern province. In addition, on May 18 police interrogated the news editor of the private television channel *Telshan Network*, threatening it with closure. The government has also blocked broadcasts by CNN and the BBC World Service.

These measures are part of an escalating attack on the media and freedom of expression by the Peoples Alliance (PA) government, reflecting its severe crisis following serious military defeats in the war against Tamil separatists.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga imposed harsh emergency laws on May 3, placing the country on "war footing" soon after the decisive northern army base of Elephant Pass fell to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). These laws curbed press freedom, banned all protests and industrial action and armed the authorities with sweeping powers to stamp out any opposition to the government.

High-ranking officials known as Competent Authorities or Censors were empowered to suppress circulation, close presses, or ban any article deemed to be a threat to "national security".

These powers are now being used to block not just reports on the deteriorating war situation but all disagreement with, or exposure of, the government and its policies. The *Sunday Leader*, which supports the opposition United National Party (UNP), had criticised the censorship regulations, demanding their withdrawal. It had also regularly revealed corruption and scandals in the PA government.

In the case of the *Uthayan*, the government censor charged that the paper had violated the censorship regulations and added in a press release: "It has also been observed that this newspaper has been maliciously and detrimentally publishing information that is biased to the LTTE and which is geared to disenchantment among the members of the armed forces and the general public of Jaffna."

Military personnel entered the premises of the *Uthayan* office to demand that the workers and journalists to move out, and sealed off the premises. Army personnel told the small traders who came to collect the day's paper that it would not be published until further notice.

The government did not cite any specific article in *Uthayan* that had violated the regulations. Military personnel had visited the *Uthayan* office a few days earlier, however, and issued a warning against the editor for publishing reports that the President was tearful when chatting with the visiting Indian Air force chief last week (this episode was first reported in Indian press). The editor was also admonished for printing the names of five civilians, including two children, who lost their lives when the air force bombed the Punceryn area in the northern province on May 12.

Uthayan's general manager and deputy editor, N. Vidyadharan, protested that the newspaper could not comply with the censorship rules because the government had not appointed an official censor in Jaffna. "We cannot expect the *Uthayan* paper to fax all the stories to the government's media centre in Colombo, and then patiently await a response from the censor," he said. "Deadlines cannot be met in Jaffna under such circumstances."

Uthayan has been the only newspaper published in Jaffna since the withdrawal of Indian troops from the north and east of Sri Lanka in 1990. It had a circulation of 40,000 copies and was being published in recent days as a single sheet due to the shortage of newsprint.

At the Telshan TV channel, news editor Nimal Perera was handed a final warning by the "Competent Authority," Director of Information Ariya Rubasinghe. Perera was threatened with charges of "violation of censorship" and questioned by the police criminal investigation department. Perera had briefly reported on a blast near a Buddhist shrine in the eastern city of Batticaloa on Wednesday.

These government moves are warning signs of a wider media blackout as Kumaratunga desperately seeks to prosecute the war against the LTTE and stamp out rising opposition.

Already the government has threatened another Sinhala-language weekend paper. Writing to the weekend *Ravaya* (the Sound) editor, the Competent Authority warned that he had

committed an offence by writing an article criticising the censorship laws under the heading of "Government shifts to a dictatorial rule" and by publishing other reports.

Earlier the government issued an order that foreign and local live television and radio programs must receive the Competent Authority's prior approval. Broadcasting of the *BBC*'s Sinhala and Tamil programs were effectively banned when the state-run Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), which had relayed the programs, took them off the air on May 11. On the same day, *BBC* and *CNN* reports on the SLBC's Channel One news program were blocked by the word "Censored".

The country's supreme court gave the muzzling of the media and free speech a boost on May 15. Delivering the verdict in a case filed by a human rights activist against the military censorship imposed on November 6 last year, the judges said fundamental rights had to be restricted in the public interest and for national security when necessary.

The government's censorship powers go far beyond the news media. Under Chapter 14-1 of the extraordinary gazette, all the following must be approved before publication: news reports, letters to editor, cartoons, articles about military operations, analysis, graphics, portrayals, films, tele-printings, telegraphs and television relays.

Some 24 censors have been employed to cut anything they decide should be suppressed. The Information Department Office has set up a Special Media Unit to issue press releases on the war situation and other related government activities. All other news and articles can be cut by censors totally or partially, as they decide. Attorney-at-law Sripathi Suriyarachchi has joined the Information Director as a Competent Authority. The lawyer is the secretary of the lawyers association, a political tool of Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

The Sinhala racist groups fully support the attack on the media and democratic rights. They have erected posters condemning the "traitors' media". The National Movement for Anti-Terrorism, a fascist group, assaulted a Sri Lankan *BBC* Sinhala service correspondent, Elmo Fernando.

Ironically, the repressive regulations were promulgated on World Press Freedom Day. On the morning of May 3, Colombo newspapers quoted the Media Minister condemning the 17-year rule of the UNP for not allowing media freedom. But "today" he said, the "broad media freedom which our government has given has brought about an unprecedented exchange of ideas in Sri Lanka society". He concluded that his government would take steps to remove even minor impediments imposed on the media.

Just hours later, the very same minister announced the government's decision to impose all the restrictions that nullified press freedom.

Editorials in most newspapers the next day praised the government's decision, while chiding the government for taking the measures belatedly. Journalists' organisations, however, soon denounced the regulations.

Among them were the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Article 19, and the International Press and Foreign Journalist Association in Sri Lanka. CPJ, a New York-based organisation, released a statement to Kumaratunga signed by its director Ann K. Cooper condemning "your government's decision to pursue this policy of censorship, which is incompatible with democratic governance".

The statement continued: "No democratically elected government can flourish by denying citizens their right to information. We urge your Excellency to lift the censorship orders immediately and to ensure that journalists are able to report freely in conflict zones, so that the Sri Lankan people may have access to independent reporting on the course of the civil war."

The Editors Guild, representing major newspapers, released a statement opposing the regulations and said it would take legal action because the laws completely suppressed press freedom. The Paris-based journalists' association, *Reporters Sans Frontieres*, sent a letter to Kumaratunga protesting against the closure of the three newspapers. Its general secretary Robert Menard declared the censorship laws to be "in contradiction with the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights, ratified by the Sri Lanka government, which guarantees freedom of expression".

As a sop to the growing opposition, the government appointed a committee to look into the appeals and complaints of media organisations and journalists. But the PA administration has a record of media censorship.

Last November it introduced legislation banning the publication or broadcast of sensitive war news. For the first time in Sri Lanka, a military spokesman was appointed to officially release war news. In a bid to prevent independent reportage, the war zone was declared out of bound for journalists.

The outright banning of newspapers now is an indication that the government's crisis is deepening further.



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