

Sri Lankan police raid home of Tamil journalist

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12 May 2004

Sri Lankan police raided the Colombo home of longstanding Tamil journalist Dharmaratnam Sivaram on the night of May 3 in a heavy-handed attempt to intimidate him. While the police claimed they were searching for explosives, Sivaram was clearly targeted because he is a Tamil and an editorial board member of *Tamilnet*, a web site sympathetic to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sivaram was in Batticaloa in the Eastern province at the time of the raid, participating in ceremonies organised by the Sri Lankan Tamil Media Alliance (SLTMA) to mark the world press freedom day. Scores of heavily armed police surrounded the house in the southern suburb of Mount Lavinia, terrifying the journalist's wife and three children as well as local residents.

About 15 police officers entered the house, claiming to have a court order to search the building. Sivaram's wife, who only speaks Tamil, could not understand what was being said or read the document she was handed. The police spent an hour combing the residence, probing the floor and compound and ransacking the wardrobes. No explosives, arms or other incriminating items were found.

The SLTMA and Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) both condemned the raid as an attack on the basic democratic rights of the press.

Sivaram has been harassed before. In 1996, the security forces searched his house and arrested him under the country's draconian emergency regulations. He was released a day later after the police failed to find any pretext to further detain him.

In June 2001, unknown intruders attempted to break into his house. Prior to the break-in, *Divayina*, a Upali Newspapers publication, and the government-controlled Tamil daily *Thinakaran* published his photo,

labelled him an LTTE member and demanded he be arrested.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the latest raid, Sivaram said: "Police raided my house as I am writing on crucial Tamil issues. I have been a journalist for 16 years. I write articles in English and Tamil, and a number of Sinhala papers like *Lankadeepa*, *Hiru*, *Yuktiya* publish Sinhala versions of my articles. The Sri Lankan government, security forces and media people know very well that I am a journalist.

"I worked for the *Island* published by Upali Newspapers from 1989 to 1995. But after I resigned from Upali Newspapers suddenly they framed me up as a Tamil Tiger and started a vicious campaign against me. The defence correspondents of the *Divayina* and *Sunday Divayina* attacked me.

"Is writing on Tamil issues an offence? What type of democracy and press freedom prevails in this county?" he exclaimed.

Over the past two decades, successive governments led by both the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) have waged a war against the LTTE and trampled on the basic democratic rights of Tamils. Security forces had sweeping powers to arrest and detain "terrorist" suspects without trial under the Prevention of Terrorist Act and emergency regulations.

It was an open secret that when police wanted to detain a Tamil, they planted explosives on his premises, arrested him and gave wide media publicity to their "discovery". Some people arrested in this way were detained for years without charges. Others simply "disappeared".

The frequent raids on Tamil residential areas largely stopped after the previous United National Front

government signed a ceasefire agreement in February 2002 with the LTTE. Following the April 2 general election, however, President Chandrika Kumaratunga's SLFP has formed a minority government with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has encouraged the security forces and associated thugs to more aggressively target Tamils.

The raid on Sivaram's house was not an isolated incident. Over the past week, police have searched a number of places in Colombo and neighbouring suburbs such as Matakkuliya, Kotahena and Dehiwala. Scores of people have been arrested and later released.

The immediate pretext is an LTTE factional struggle that emerged after its eastern commander, V. Muralitharan or Karuna, broke away and attempted to establish his own organisation. While the LTTE leadership effectively crushed the revolt, killings and reprisals have continued in the East and in Colombo where Karuna loyalists are reported to have fled.

The police and military claim that the rival groups are active in Colombo. The media has circulated stories warning of escalating factional violence and urged a crackdown. It is also quite possible that the security forces are exploiting the situation to mount a wider dragnet against Tamils. The raid on Sivaram's house may be a sign of what is to come.

Significantly, neither the government information ministry nor the presidential secretariat has responded to criticisms of the raid. In previous instances, one or other of these institutions would have issued a perfunctory statement disapproving of what had taken place. The silence is an indication that these anti-democratic measures have been approved in the upper echelons of the government and the state.



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