

Gunmen kill prominent Tamil journalist in Sri Lanka

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The funeral of Dharmaratnam Sivaram, a well-known journalist who was murdered in Colombo last week, took place in eastern Batticaloa on Monday. Sivaram was a senior editorial board member of *Tamilnet*, a pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) web site, and a writer on Tamil issues in the *Daily Mirror*, a Sri Lankan daily. His murder, which was clearly politically motivated, has heightened communal tensions in the country.

Sivaram, 46, was abducted at about 10:30 p.m. on April 28 at Bambalapitiya in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo. Two and a half hours later his body was found on the city's outskirts, about 500 metres from the country's parliamentary precincts in Sri Jayawardenepura. Forensic expert Jeanne Perera, who conducted the post-mortem, reported that Sivaram had been hit on the back of the head and shoulders and shot at pointblank range.

Eyewitnesses told police and the media that two people had hung around the restaurant where Sivaram had been meeting with others. As he was leaving, a silver-grey intercooler vehicle drove up beside him and two men bundled him inside. All of this took place close to the Bambalapitiya police station. His body was dumped inside a high security zone, which is subject to frequent police patrols.

Sivaram's wife Yogaranjani Dharmaratnam lodged a complaint at the Bambalapitiya police at 1 a.m. after receiving an anonymous telephone call that her husband had been abducted. The body was found at about the same time. The police have appointed two investigative teams, but have announced no breakthroughs.

Sri Lankan media and journalist associations, including the Free Media Movement (FMM), along with the Committee for Protection of Journalists (CPJ)

and Reporters sans Frontiers (RSF) have condemned the murder as an attack on press freedom. On Tuesday, journalists took part in a picket near Fort railway station in central Colombo to protest against the killing.

There are plenty of suspects in the case. Various Sinhala extremist organisations and the security forces themselves regard anyone openly sympathetic to the LTTE as a legitimate target. In the course of the country's 20-year civil war thousands of Tamils have been arbitrarily detained as "LTTE suspects" held without trial and in some cases tortured. Elements of the police and military along with associated paramilitary groups and chauvinist gangs have been involved in abductions and murders. The manner in which Sivaram was seized and killed indicates planning and experience—a professional job.

Even the notoriously biased Colombo press was compelled to acknowledge obliquely that the Sri Lankan security forces may have been involved. An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* on Monday stated: "All we can say is that if the dastardly act had any kind of acquiescence of a state organ, we like to remind them that no one can pardon anyone in the pay of the state descending to the level of a terrorist organisation like the LTTE in killing a messenger."

Sivaram had been harassed by the police and unidentified gangs several times. He was arrested in 1996 under the country's draconian emergency laws but the police had to release him for lack of evidence. In June 2001, an unknown gang tried to break into his house. Significantly, the break-in was preceded by two articles—in the Sinhala racist *Divayina* and the state-owned *Thinakaran*—branding him as a "Tiger"—that is, a LTTE member. Last May, police raided his house while he was absent and searched for explosives and any other evidence to incriminate him. They found

nothing.

Sivaram's murder comes amid an escalating communal campaign by Sinhala extremist groups against attempts to restart stalled peace talks. Those involved include the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a key component of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is led by right-wing Buddhist monks. Sivaram's criticism of these groups made him a particular target for vilification.

The JVP and JHU are targeting President Chandrika Kumaratunga's attempts to establish a joint mechanism with the LTTE to distribute tsunami aid. Both parties declare that such a mechanism grants legitimacy to the LTTE and paves the way for the LTTE to establish a separate Tamil state. In reality, the JVP and JHU regard any concession to the LTTE as tantamount to treason and are deeply hostile to the entire "peace process".

At a recent meeting organised by the Patriotic National Movement (PNM), a JVP-front organisation, speakers branded various non-government organisations (NGOs) as "hired agents" of Western countries and some as "traitors" who support the LTTE. Sivaram was specifically denounced as "a Tiger".

A rabid JHU statement saluted last week's murder, declaring: "The death of Sivaram is a warning to all extremists.... The fate of the editor of the *Tamilnet* is a warning example to all those who oppose the country in the future." It concluded with a call to arms, appealing to the government to "remove all obstacles on the path of armed forces and other services to exercise maximum force to act in defence of the country".

Whoever carried out the crime, Sivaram's murder was clearly aimed at stoking up communal conflict and provoking a response by the LTTE. An April 30 LTTE statement declared: "Sri Lankan military intelligence and para-militaries collaborating with the security forces are responsible for the murder." It conferred the title of "Maamanithar" on Sivaram, both as a mark of respect and a warning that the LTTE does not take his killing lightly.

In the east of the island, the February 2002 ceasefire agreement is already a virtual dead letter. Clashes between the LTTE and a breakaway faction headed by V. Muralitharan or Karuna are continuing. The Karuna faction has the backing of sections of the armed forces,

which are hostile to the so-called peace process. Both sides have been involved in assassinations and ambushes, raising the real danger of a return to full-scale civil war.

The UPFA government is under pressure from the major powers and business to press ahead with peace talks. Last week it issued a statement condemning Sivaram's murder. But the coalition is deeply divided and efforts to form a joint tsunami relief body have stalled for months because of the JVP's opposition. Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party is just as mired in Sinhala chauvinism as the JVP is, and therefore hesitant to lose the support of its ally.

In this political climate, it is highly unlikely that the police will track down and prosecute those who planned and executed Sivaram's murder.



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