

Racist attacks on Tamil newspaper in Sri Lanka

Our correspondent
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In the wake of the assassination of Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on August 12, the media and political parties in Colombo have whipped up a climate of communal tension and fear. In this political atmosphere, a series of violent physical attacks have taken place on *Sudar Oli*—a Tamil-language newspaper sympathetic to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In the evening of August 29, a couple of unidentified thugs hurled two hand grenades at the newspaper's editorial offices at Grandpass, Colombo. Four people were injured. David Selvaratnam, 60, a security guard employed by *Sudar Oli*, later died in hospital. The three others worked for the newspaper. The attackers initially tried to enter the upper floor of the building, which housed the editorial staff, but were prevented by the security guard. After tossing the hand grenades, they fled the scene on a motorbike.

The grenade attack follows a string of previous incidents. On August 20, a hand grenade was thrown inside the *Sudar Oli* branch office at Wellawatta in Colombo South. The three employees who were there at that time escaped unhurt only because the grenade failed to explode.

Three days later, on August 23, Premachandran Yathurshan, a Tamil journalist employed by *Sudar Oli* was physically assaulted by members of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), while he was reporting on their demonstration at Fort railway station in central Colombo. The mob snatched his digital camera, mobile phone and money, as well as his letter of appointment as a *Sudar Oli* reporter and other documents.

Yathurshan was then handed over to police as an "LTTE suspect" despite his protestations that he was a journalist. Far from dealing with his assailants, the police sided with the JVP and took the reporter into

custody. He was released the following day on personal bail of 7,500 (\$US75)—the equivalent of about a month's pay. His personal effects have not been returned.

The JVP had called the demonstration to denounce the LTTE for the murder of Kadirgamar and to demand more aggressive action by the government. None of those who blame the LTTE for the assassination, including the police and security forces, have offered any conclusive evidence. In fact, it is just as likely that the conspiracy was organised by Sinhala extremists intent on blaming the LTTE and sabotaging President Chandrika Kumaratunga's tentative efforts to restart the stalled "peace process".

The latest attacks on *Sudar Oli* and its journalists confirms the willingness of such layers to resort to violent methods. Although it has not been clearly established who threw the grenades, obvious suspicion falls on chauvinist parties such as the JVP and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and like-minded elements in the military establishment. In these circles, any Tamil is regarded as "an LTTE suspect" and therefore a legitimate target for violent attack.

In recent months, the JVP and JHU have mounted a vicious campaign against a deal between Kumaratunga and the LTTE to jointly manage the distribution of reconstruction aid for the victims of the December 26 tsunami. The JVP quit the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) when the president authorised the agreement in June. Since Kadirgamar's murder, the anti-LTTE agitation has intensified.

Two days before the hand grenade attack on the *Sudar Oli* office in Wellawatta, JVP propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa denounced the newspaper at a public meeting for having close relations with "Tiger terrorists". In the language of

communal politics in Colombo, his comments amounted to an incitement to violence.

The JVP denied any responsibility for the Wellawatte attack. It also issued a disingenuous statement declaring that its members had not assaulted the newspaper's journalist. "[W]hat has happened there was only an inquiry into the identification of a person who behaved in a suspicious way" who was then handed over to nearby police officers.

The JVP statement then called for what amounts to state witchhunt of the newspaper. "It is an obvious fact that *Sudar Oli* is a newspaper which openly represents the Tiger organisation. The conduct of the *Sudar Oli* paper, in claiming this suspicious person as its journalist, is suspicious too. So, we demand the security forces have a proper inquiry into that matter."

Following the latest grenade attack at the newspaper's main office, JVP issued another statement after coming under widespread criticism. It condemned "this cowardice attack with high contempt" and devoted half of the statement to attempting to prove that the party was not behind the incident. Whether it was directly involved or not, the JVP through its inflammatory comments bears responsibility for creating the political climate in which such outrages can take place.

Several media organisations have condemned the attacks on *Sudar Oli*. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) issued a statement urging "all armed political parties and movements to respect press freedom and free expression that are the essential components of any democracy". The Free Media Movement (FMM) branded the latest assault "an attack on press freedom and media diversity".

The police are investigating the killing of the security guard at the *Sudar Oli* editorial office but it is unlikely that the culprits will be caught. The Sri Lankan security forces are imbued with the same deeply engrained anti-Tamil prejudice that the JVP and JHU give vent to.

Four months ago, Dharmaratnam Sivaram, a prominent Tamil journalist, was abducted from a busy street in Colombo and murdered. Sivaram was a senior editorial member of the pro-LTTE website Tamilnet and wrote for the English-language *Daily Mirror* newspaper. The JHU issued a statement praising the killing, and a previously unknown group calling itself the "Therapuththabaya Brigade" claimed

responsibility. The police have made several arrests but have filed no case against any suspects.

The condemnations of the grenade attack have done nothing to halt the violent campaign against *Sudar Oli*. On August 30, two reporters attached to the newspaper were assaulted while waiting for a bus after covering proceedings in the Sri Lankan parliament. What is being whipping up by the JVP, JHU and other parties is an atmosphere in which the terrible anti-Tamil pogroms of Sri Lanka's past will again be repeated.



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