

Sri Lankan authorities mount increasing attacks on media freedom

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Police and military harassment, intimidation and physical attacks directed against Sri Lankan media personnel, mainly targeting Tamil journalists, have been mounting since Mahinda Rajapakse assumed the presidency last November.

These incidents have emerged amid a sharp rise in violence involving the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the growing danger of a return to open civil war. Under Rajapakse's unstable minority government, the Sri Lankan armed forces have taken increasingly provocative and repressive actions against the island's Tamil minority, including large-scale round-ups of innocent civilians.

The attacks on the media are a crude attempt to intimidate any opposition to the government and the military. Over the past two months, these have included:

On December 15, armed soldiers broke into the offices of two Tamil-language dailies, *Namathu Eelanaadu* and *Valampuri* in the northern city of Jaffna and ransacked them, harassing and questioning workers and checking national identity cards. The military gave no reason for searching the offices, claiming the actions were "routine security measures".

Two days later, B. Parthipan, a journalist for the Tamil daily, *Thinakkural*, was arrested in Colombo by the police under emergency regulations, along with two *Thinakkural* computer technicians, S. Kokularaj Kokulan and P. Sarveswaran. They were released after 12 hours, during which they were questioned, fingerprinted, photographed and videotaped.

On December 19, security forces assaulted three Tamil journalists reporting on a student demonstration in Jaffna. They were T. Sabeswaran from *Thinakkural*, Vincent Jeyan from the state-run *Thinakaran* and G. Jerad from *Namathu Eelanaadu*. At least 14 protestors were injured by security forces during the demonstration, including Professor N. Perinpanathan and medical faculty student

leader T. Kandeepan.

Three days later, K. Navarathnam, a distributor for *Thinakkural* was shot dead in front of the newspaper's Jaffna office by unidentified assailants. On January 1, the newspaper's premises were subjected to a search by an army unit that arrived without warning.

On January 5, Joy Jeyakumar, a photographer for the Tamil daily *Veerakesari*, was summoned to the criminal investigation department (CID) office and questioned. In its January 1 edition, the newspaper had published photographs of Tamils detained in the Wellawatte police station in Colombo. The residents had been arrested in a sweeping cordon and search operation conducted jointly by the police and military in a number of predominantly Tamil suburbs in Colombo in the early hours of December 31.

To protest against these incidents, several media organisations, including the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, the Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance, the Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum, the Media Employees Trade Union Federation and the Free Media Movement, held a demonstration of about 100 people in front of Colombo's Fort railway station on January 12.

At the protest, Vincent Jeyan, *Thinakaran's* Jaffna correspondent, who was severely beaten by the military at the December 19 student demonstration in Jaffna, spoke to the WSWs. Jeyan also works for Shakthi FM (a Tamil-language radio service) and Associated Press.

He explained: "Students had started a campaign to protest against army repression. The Vice Chancellor of Jaffna University, Professor C. Mohandas, was also present. The demonstration was peaceful and when it started in front of the university the soldiers stepped back. We thought they might let the demonstration pass. Suddenly shooting started from all sides, and then came an assault using rifle butts. The soldiers were shouting, 'Run you dogs, run.' People fell down running.

“Soldiers surrounded me and started to attack. I told them that I was a journalist and showed my state-issued media accreditation card. They paid no heed to it. They assaulted me on my back with iron chains, batons and gun butts, all the time asking, ‘Did you come to take pictures for the Tigers?’”

Jeyan was kicked and shoved. His bag was torn and he lost his diary with telephone numbers, his cellular phone, 2,200 rupees in cash and his ATM banking card. His camera was also damaged. The attackers kept calling him a “Kotiya [Tiger],” thus implying he was an LTTE supporter. He wrote a number of protest letters, including to the president, prime minister, media minister and justice minister, but to no avail.

Other recent incidents provide a further warning that Rajapakse’s government is deepening its onslaught on democratic rights, including media freedoms.

In early January, allegations were made of a plot to assassinate Killi Rajamahendran, the owner of the Maharajah organisation, which controls three TV stations and a radio station with wide audiences. These outlets have been critical of Rajapakse and his alliance with Sinhala chauvinist parties.

The plot was reported in the January 1 edition of the English-language weekly, the *Sunday Leader*, which stated that Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake was allegedly connected to the plan. According to the article, Wickremanayake denied being involved but told the writer that a top politician was engaged in the plot.

Rajapakse promised a probe into the matter. But the Maharaja organisation’s human resource director Priyantha Serasinghe told the media that despite complaints, there had been no response from the president or the inspector general of police, Chandra Fernando.

The *Sunday Leader* of January 15 followed up with a detailed account of an abusive threat made by Rajapakse in a phone call to its editor Lasantha Wikramatunge. The call concerned an unfavourable report in the newspaper on Shiranthi Rajapakse, the president’s wife. Wikramatunge has written a letter of complaint to the president and the police inspector-general.

On January 10, the mass media and information minister, Anura Priya Darshana Yapa, summoned the editors and senior journalists from Tamil print and electronic media to a meeting with military and police spokesmen at the media ministry. The minister ignored complaints from editors about detentions and interrogations of journalists. Instead of warning the military or police about their actions, he told the media to

be “cautious” in reporting news on certain incidents and to refrain from publishing “provocative news”.

The meeting appeared to have been called on the military’s request to impose unofficial censorship. According to a report on *free media web*, the military spokesman, Brigadier Prasad Kariyawasam, suggested that all media should nominate specific journalists as defence correspondents to deal with defence-related matters, supposedly for the convenience of both parties. In fact, the move is aimed at tighter supervision of the press.

In September, the naval chief of staff, Sarath Weerasekera, and former military spokesman Daya Ratnayake summoned some of Sri Lanka’s best-known film directors to a meeting and warned them against producing films that lowered the morale of the armed forces. Instead, the directors were told to produce favourable films on the military.

An editorial in the *Island* newspaper, on January 7 entitled “Terrorism and media” also accused the press of helping the enemy. “Every terror group manipulates the media. The LTTE is also quite adept at doing so. After all, journalism in itself is a process of manipulating others and being manipulated... Those who are wittingly or unwittingly helping the LTTE with its separatist propaganda are aiding and abetting its terror and making a contribution to its canopying to create a criminals paradise in Sri Lanka,” it stated.

Sri Lankan governments have a long history of censorship and of harassing and intimidating media representatives who dare to make even mild criticisms. Like its predecessors, the Rajapakse regime is intent on silencing any opposition as it stirs up a climate of communal hostility and paves the road to war.



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