

Sri Lanka: Two killed in attack on Tamil newspaper office

Our correspondent
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An armed attack on the offices of the Tamil-language newspaper *Uthayan* in northern Sri Lanka on May 2 has left two people dead and another two seriously injured. The assault is the latest in a series of calculated provocations aimed at further heightening communal tensions, as the island slides towards renewed civil war between the military and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The attack on the pro-LTTE newspaper in Jaffna town came in the midst of three days of events organised by Colombo government to mark UNESCO's world press freedom day. The killings underscore the degree to which basic democratic rights, including those of the media, are being systematically undermined under President Mahinda Rajapakse. Over the last week, the police and military have detained hundreds of Tamils in Colombo and other areas alleged to be "terrorist suspects".

On May 2, a gang of five men armed with T-56 automatic rifles entered the *Uthayan* office at about 7.25 p.m. and began firing. Marketing manager Bastian George Sagayathas, 36, also known as Suresh, was the first killed. The thugs then moved to the circulation section and, while firing, ordered workers to lie down and not to raise their heads. S. Uthayakumar, 48, was injured during the shooting. Circulation supervisor S. Ranjith, 25, was killed when he raised his head to see what was happening to Uthayakumar. He was held down and shot dead.

Another staff member was forced at gunpoint to lead the gang to the editorial area to find the sub-editor, but the rest of the staff had fled. After raking the computers with gunfire, the attackers fled on motor bikes. The two injured—Uthayakumar and another employee N. Thayakaran, 24—are both in intensive care units.

No one has claimed responsibility for the assault and

none of the attackers have been caught, but all the evidence points to one of the armed Tamil paramilitaries aligned to the government and the military. Jaffna town is under tight military and police security. Along Kasthuriyar road, where the newspaper offices are situated, there are army checkpoints in both directions. It is impossible for anyone to enter or leave the area, especially carrying large weapons, without the knowledge of the military. According to survivors, the gang members spoke Tamil.

Uthayan editor N. Vithyatharan told the media: "I have no doubt that this is the work of armed groups working with the government security forces. The reason for the attack may have been a cartoon that the newspaper published on Monday [May 1] of the leader of a rival group showing him prostrating himself before the president." The cartoon was of the leader of Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), Douglas Devanda, who is minister for social services and social welfare in Rajapakse's government.

The government and the Colombo media, which have been responsible for whipping up a climate of communal tension and hatred, have hypocritically condemned the attack on the newspaper. President Rajapakse condemned the attack, ordered an investigation and reportedly rang V. Saravanabavan, the owner of the Sudaroli newspaper group that publishes *Uthayan*.

According to *Uthayan* editor Vithyatharan, Rajapakse, in his telephone conversation with Saravanabavan, denied any government involvement in the attack. Vithyatharan said: "His [Rajapakse's] thinking was that the Tigers [LTTE] had done it ahead of his speech [on world press freedom day] to embarrass him. But we clearly told him that the government should bear the responsibility."

Information Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa publicly blamed the LTTE for the attack, “The LTTE wants to tarnish Sri Lanka’s image and wants to show the outside world that the government is not for media freedom,” he told the press.

The police have rounded up six suspects but the “investigation” into the attack is a farce. Those arrested included four students from the eastern province temporarily residing in Jaffna. All six had to be granted bail because eyewitnesses were unable to pick them out in an identification parade.

The *Uthayan* cartoon of the EPDP leader might have been the trigger for the attack, but there are other possibilities. The newspaper regularly publishes reports of the repressive activities of the security forces against Tamils in the North and East. Sections of the military and associated Tamil militaries have the means and motive for the assault on the *Uthayan* offices.

The attack is calculated to further inflame communal tensions and undermine attempts to restart peace talks. Over the last month, more than 150 people including LTTE cadre, civilians and military personnel have been killed by both sides in what amounts to an undeclared war in the North and East. The violence sharply escalated after the provocative killing of prominent pro-LTTE politician V. Vigneswaran in broad daylight on April 7. Police have not caught his murderers.

Last August *Uthayan*’s sister paper in Colombo, *Sudar Oli* was the subject of a racist campaign, including grenade attacks on its main office and a branch office in Colombo that killed one person and injured four. One of its journalists was physically attacked by a Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) mob near Fort Station in central Colombo. An editorial in *Uthayan* last week noted that the newspaper had during its 20-year history faced threats by armed groups and direct physical attacks before.

The government’s attempt to blame the LTTE for the latest assault on the *Uthayan* offices lacks any credibility. Neither the police nor the ministers have offered a shred of evidence implicating the LTTE. Moreover, on the face of it, the LTTE has no reason to attack its own supporters to embarrass Rajapakse on international press freedom day. The long history of trampling on democratic rights by successive Colombo governments and the security forces is “embarrassing” enough without having to artificially manufacture

further proof.

There have been numerous instances since civil war erupted in 1983 of the media and journalists being attacked by thugs connected to politicians or the security forces. In April last year, unidentified gunmen abducted Saivaram Dharmeratnam, a prominent media columnist and co-editor of pro-LTTE *TamilNet* web site, and dumped his body in a high security zone near parliament. For much of the time, the country has been under emergency rule and subject to media censorship.

International media organisations have condemned the attack on *Uthayan*. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) executive director, Ann Cooper, urged President Rajapakse and the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) overseeing the 2002 ceasefire to “address the safety of journalists on all sides of the conflict”. International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) president, Christopher Warren, said: “On the eve of world press freedom day and while the Sri Lankan government acknowledges the vital role of journalists in society, it is cruelly ironic that such a cold and calculated attack can take place.”

The assault on the *Uthayan* offices is a sharp warning not just to the media, but more broadly to working people, that a renewed and savage attack on basic democratic rights is already underway as the Rajapakse government and the military prepare to plunge the island back to civil war.



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