

Sri Lankan military personnel questioned over murder of journalist

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The detention and interrogation last week of a Sri Lankan military intelligence officer and a soldier over the murder of a free lance journalist, Sampath Lakmal de Silva, raises further questions about the intrigues of the armed forces in provoking a return to war on the island.

The 23-year-old De Silva was killed on July 1. According to the police, his assailants shot him four times—once in the ear and three times to the head using a 9mm pistol—and took his notebook and mobile phone. His body was found the following morning in Jayawardana Avenue, a residential area of the Colombo suburb of Dehiwala, about four kilometres from his home.

After questions were raised by several media organisations about the suspicious character of the murder, the Dehiwela police detained a military intelligence officer who was later released after questioning. Normal police procedure in Sri Lanka is to hold suspects until they can be produced in court. The officers have not been named.

De Silva had certainly angered military intelligence as well as the two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). As defence correspondent for the newspaper *Sathdina*, he wrote several articles last year under the pen name of Admirala, criticising intelligence personnel for corruption and connections with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He also wrote about the financial irregularities and internal disputes of the JVP and JHU.

Sathdina deputy editor, Srilal Priyantha, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that de Silva had contacts inside military intelligence as well as with various Sinhala and Tamil politicians and LTTE activists. “He was abducted and tortured by the army personnel last October after he wrote an article about the financial corruption of the military intelligence unit,” he said.

Priyantha said that de Silva had been warned by his abductors not to write such articles again. Fearing

reprisals, he had not made a complaint to the police and had not published anything further on the issue under his known pen names. Previously he had worked for the Sinhala daily *Lakbima* and TNL, a private television service, and he recently joined the media unit of the resettlement and rehabilitation ministry.

De Silva’s mother told the WSWs that her son received a telephone call at about 9 p.m. on July 1. He told her that he had spoken to “Kumara Sir” and that he had a big job to do that night. He left home a few minutes later and did not return. According to de Silva’s mother, Kumara was an officer in the military intelligence unit. Although de Silva wanted to bring a friend, he was advised to come alone.

Further suspicions of military involvement in the murder were raised in parliament on July 8. Speaking in the debate on the extension of the state of national emergency, M.K. Sivajilingam, an MP with the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), declared that de Silva had been killed because he knew the names of those responsible for killing five young people in Avissawella.

Two other MPs—V. Radhakrishnan from the Upcountry People’s Front (UPF) and Ranga Bandara from United National Party (UNP)—made the same allegation, but gave no details. Bandara demanded to know why the government had not ordered the arrest of the army personnel involved.

The five youth, thought to be Tamils, disappeared in the Colombo area during search operations by the security forces following a suicide bomb attack on army headquarters on April 25. Army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka was seriously injured in the attack, which killed 11 people, mainly military personnel. The headless bodies of the five youth were later found in Avissawella. After the initial accounts, there have been no reports of any police investigation.

The government has yet to respond to the parliamentary

questions, but it is attempting to pin the blame for de Silva's murder on the LTTE. On July 3, the state-owned *Daily News* quoted a Media Centre for National Security spokesperson as saying: "He has written strongly against the LTTE and condemned their atrocities." The article claimed that de Silva had provided the military with vital information. Since that report, however, the government and state-run media have gone silent on the murder.

The Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) issued a statement on July 4, saying: "The assassination of Lakmal at this juncture, when the country is on the verge of war, is an indication that journalists have been targeted by various groups who are attempting to achieve their objectives by making journalists their targets."

Several media organisations, including the SLWJA, the Free Media Movement (FMM) and the Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance held protests in Colombo on July 6 and in Kandy on July 7 to demand that the killers be found and charged.

The FMM later expressed concern over the release of the two military personnel just an hour after their detention. It has sought, but not been granted, a meeting with Defence Secretary Gothabaya Rajapakse, President Mahinda Rajapakse's brother. According to the *Sunday Leader*, the police have found the names of the two suspects by investigating de Silva's mobile phone call records.

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) president Christopher Warren condemned the murder, saying: "This is a ruthless and senseless attack which is particularly worrisome given de Silva's record of unbiased reporting, and this signifies a further disintegration of basic freedom and safety standards and protections for media workers in Sri Lanka."

The murder of de Silva is not an isolated incident. Over the past 16 months, six journalists and other media workers have been killed. In each case, there have been strong grounds for suspecting the involvement of the military and allied paramilitary groups.

One of the most prominent murders was that of Dharmaratnam Sivaram. He was abducted on the night of April 28 last year in Colombo city. A few hours later his body was found inside a high security zone about 500 metres from the parliament buildings. There is every reason to believe that Sivaram, who was an editorial board member of the pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* website, was murdered by the security forces or Sinhala extremist gangs. He had been denounced as a "Tamil Tiger" and the

JHU justified his death as "a warning to all those who oppose the country in the future."

This May gunmen stormed into the offices of *Uthayan*, a daily newspaper in Jaffna, and killed two employees. The government immediately blamed the LTTE over the attack, but the newspaper owners and employees insisted that the attack had been carried out by a paramilitary group with the help of the military. In particular, the publication had been critical of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), a partner in the country's ruling coalition, and also the military for their repressive methods against Tamils.

No one has been detained in either case.

Nor will there be any serious investigation into the latest killing of de Silva. The *Lakbima* newspaper reported on July 10 that police have finally decided to examine the firearms of the military intelligence officers who were with de Silva moments before his death. It will be done in the next few days, the report declared. It would not be at all surprising if, having been alerted, the weapons are found to be missing. The newspaper noted that "because of the pressure of various parties", investigation teams have been inactive. According to the police, there is no evidence to show the LTTE was involved.

The fact that military intelligence is implicated in de Silva's murder is no surprise. Throughout the country's protracted civil war, intelligence units have been involved in provocations, murders and other dirty operations, either directly or through allied Tamil paramilitary units. They are able to operate with impunity, as there has never been a serious police or government investigation into their activities.



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