

Sri Lankan president demands media toes the line on the war

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Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse held a meeting with editors and heads of media bodies on Wednesday ostensibly to explain the “current situation in the country”. The real purpose of the meeting was to pressure those assembled to faithfully reproduce the government’s propaganda on its widening war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The fact that the meeting was called at all reveals a distinct nervousness. The media in Sri Lanka is already toeing the line. Virtually all reports of the war are based directly on government speeches and military statements. There is little first-hand reporting from the war zones and no opposition to the war in the editorials and commentary.

Yet some coverage of the military’s atrocities and its indiscriminate attacks on civilians has inevitably slipped into the Colombo and international media, not simply from pro-LTTE reports but the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and various non-government organisations. As a result, there have been concerns expressed in military circles about losing the propaganda war, and calls for the suppression of “LTTE disinformation”.

Appropriately, Rajapakse began his meeting with a lie, insisting that the military was engaged purely in defensive action. “There is no war,” he declared, “but only retaliatory attacks on the part of the forces in the national interest to protect our positions.” If there were a war, he said, government forces would “fight and march forward”.

The army has already fought and tried to march forward. Rajapakse initiated military action against the LTTE on July 26. In open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, he ordered the military to retake the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate. While the president claimed that the operation was “limited” and

“humanitarian,” the air force bombed LTTE targets in other areas and fighting continued even after the LTTE opened the sluice gate and provided water to farmers downstream.

Rajapakse’s “war for water” was simply a pretext for initiating a broader offensive to seize eastern areas where the military calculated the LTTE was weak. Inevitably fighting has spread to other areas. If the army is not “marching forward” elsewhere, it is only because it has suffered significant setbacks as the LTTE has probed its defences on the Jaffna peninsula.

The day after Rajapakse’s meeting, the military acknowledged that 106 soldiers had died in fighting over the previous week on the northern peninsula alone. Its warplanes have repeatedly strafed LTTE positions in an effort to drive out its fighters. According to UN reports, 150,000 civilians have been displaced, including 41,000 in the north of the island. Fighting continued yesterday.

To claim “there is no war” is absurd. To declare that the military is simply engaged in defensive actions is a gross falsification designed to obscure the government’s responsibility for plunging the island back to civil war. Rajapakse’s posturing as a man of peace “open to negotiations” reeks of hypocrisy and cynicism. Yet the president’s words were dutifully repeated in all the media the following day without a critical comment to be found anywhere.

Having set out the government’s line on the war, Rajapakse then called on the gathered media representatives to be more responsible. “I have always been a friend of the media and welcome objective criticism,” he declared, “but I will not condone irresponsible journalism that threatens national and public security.” He said he didn’t like censorship, but insisted the media had to exercise self-restraint.

Rajapakse has extensive powers under existing emergency regulations to impose media censorship.

As Rajapakse admitted, the government was already under “severe pressure to get tough with the media”. People were reminding him, he said, that previous presidents have imposed strict censorship. According to recent press reports, several top generals complained at a national security council meeting last month that sections of the media were giving “undue publicity” to the LTTE. The president immediately summoned those responsible and directed them to alter their coverage.

An example of what the military regards as responsible reporting can be seen on the official defence ministry website. Last Monday the air force bombed a former orphanage in the LTTE-held Mullaittivu district, killing up to 61 schoolchildren, who, according to the LTTE, were involved in a two-day training course. SLMM officials and representatives of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) visited the site and confirmed that the casualties were mainly teenage schoolgirls. No evidence was found of military equipment or training.

Yet the government and the military continue to insist that they bombed an LTTE training camp and that the dead were “child soldiers”. On its website, the military posted a “highly classified video,” which it claims, “very clearly shows the training sessions of LTTE cadres clad in uniforms, movements of camouflaged and other vehicles, rushing in and rushing out to evacuate the large numbers of wounded LTTE cadres”. As anyone who watches the blurry footage can see, the statement is ridiculous. As SLMM head Ulf Henricsson politely put it, “the video pictures we have seen are inconclusive”.

Yet the military still denies the atrocity and claims that it killed more than 300 LTTE cadres in the air strike. One particularly sinister aspect of the website statement is that it brands all efforts to refute its lies as “the false claims of pro-LTTE propagandists”. Presumably this also applies to the evidence provided by SLMM, UNICEF and the UN, which the statement fails to concretely address. As far as the military is concerned, anyone who does not accept its propaganda uncritically is in the camp of the enemy.

The military and its allies among the various anti-LTTE militia and Sinhala extremist groups do not limit themselves to verbal threats and calls for tougher

censorship. Physical attacks on the media, particularly on the Tamil language press, have intensified.

On Tuesday, Sathasivam Baskaran, a distributor of the Tamil daily *Uthayan*, was shot dead while distributing the newspaper in Jaffna town during a brief one-hour relaxation of the strict curfew. With the town under virtual martial law, the murder was almost certainly carried out by the security forces or its allies. Baskaran is the fourth *Uthayan* employee murdered this year. On the same day, military personnel searched the Colombo offices of *Suder Oli*, an associated paper of *Uthayan*.

There is no indication that these gross attacks on press freedom were even discussed at Rajapakse’s meeting with media representatives. The lack of any critical comment in the media following the meeting makes clear that no one is going to step out of line.



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