

Sri Lankan journalists protest against attacks on media

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More than 300 journalists demonstrated at the Fort Railway Station in central Colombo last month to condemn the growing harassment and intimidation of the media, including killings, abductions and death threats. As President Mahinda Rajapakse has intensified the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), his government and the military have imposed what amounts to a regime of de facto censorship.

The protest on January 23 was organised by a number of organisations including the Free Media Movement (FMM), Sri Lanka Working Journalist Association (SWJA), Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU), Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum, (SMMF), Tamil Journalist Association (TJA) and National Federation of Area Journalists (NFAJ).

The protesters displayed a variety of placards with slogans including: “Release Mawbima journalist Parameswari”; “Stop harassment against Mawbima and Sunday Standards”; “Arrest killers of Sampath Lakmal”; and “Condemn attacks against journalists”. The *Mawbima* (Motherland) and *Sunday Standards* are weekly newspapers that have published articles critical of the government.

In the course of the protest, deputy Labor minister Mervin Silva appeared with a gang of thugs and sought to create a provocation. They shouted patriotic slogans and hailed the military for capturing the eastern town of Vaharai from the LTTE, but left after the protesting journalists refused to be intimidated. Earlier in the month, Silva and supporters broke up an antiwar rally and physically attacked journalists.

FMM convener Sunanda Deshapriya told reporters at the protest rally: “Newspapers have been banned in some parts of the country. Journalists, who expose the truth, are being either intimidated or kidnapped. The media in Sri Lanka faces a harsh future as it attempts to provide correct and true information to the public in a hostile

environment.”

SWJA general secretary Dharmasiri Lankapeli told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “The war has unleashed various reactionary social forces. Abductions, killings and everything happen. We must oppose the promoting and encouraging of the war. The right of expression is a basic democratic right. To enjoy democratic rights there should be peace.”

The French-based Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) noted in its 2006 review on Sri Lanka: “The dormant war between security forces and the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) has had harmful consequences for the safety of journalists, particularly Tamils.” Other international journalist organisations have also condemned the increasing use of violence against the Sri Lanka media.

In December, Rajapakse reintroduced and extended the notorious Prevention and Prohibition of Terrorist Activities legislation that allows for the lengthy detention without trial of alleged “terrorists”. New regulations have extended the law to allow for the prosecution of anyone, including journalists and media organisations, on the vague charge of “supporting” terrorism.

President Rajapakse, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka have called meetings of media representatives on several occasions to warn them against criticising the war on the grounds that it will affect national security and the morale of the security forces.

There is little doubt that many of the attacks on journalists have been carried out either by the security forces or associated chauvinist thugs. The incidents include:

* Subramaniam Sugeedharajan, a correspondent for the Tamil daily *Sudar Oli* in Trincomalee, was killed in January last year. He was murdered the day after he wrote an article about the attacks being committed by paramilitary groups aligned to the military in the eastern

district.

* On the evening of May 2, a gang of thugs armed with T-56 automatic rifles stormed the *Uthayan* office in Jaffna and shot dead the marketing manager, Bastian George Sagayathas, and circulation supervisor, S. Ranjith. Two other employees were injured in the attack. Several weeks later, the *Uthayan* newspaper distributor was shot dead.

* Sampath Lakmal, a correspondent for *Sathdina*, was abducted on his way from home in the Colombo suburbs of Borlasgamuwa on June 30. His body was found next day at Dehiwala. He had been shot in the head. Police questioned an intelligence officer and a Sri Lankan army soldier about the murder but they were released.

* Last August Nadarajah Kuruparan, a senior news programmer attached to Sooriyan FM, was kidnapped then released 24 hours later. His abductors warned him to halt a program that exposed the abuse of the country's Tamil minority.

* On August 21 Sinnathamby Sivamaharajah, editor and the managing director of the Tamil-language daily *Namathu Eelanadu* (Our Eelam Nation) was shot dead by gunmen at his home at Tellippalai, 15 kilometres from Jaffna.

* On November 23, Munusamy Parameswari, a journalist with *Mawbima*, was arrested. To date she has been detained by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) without charge. According to the FMM, the CID officials have denied access to her by journalists. She was produced before the court on January 23 and her detention was extended for another 90 days. She told the court that she had been threatened by Special Task Force (STF) officers and told to give up journalism. Parameswari has now filed a fundamental rights case against her arrest and detention.

* Last month Kumaravel Gajan, a proofreader for the Tamil newspaper *Thinakkural*, was arrested in Colombo. He is still being detained at the Boossa detention camp in the southern district of Galle. The newspaper's management has tried without success to get him released.

* On January 9, a group of Sri Lankan army personnel stormed the offices of *Thinakkural*, *Uthayan* and *Valampuri* newspapers in Jaffna and warned staff not to publish reports by the Jaffna University Student Union. Students in Jaffna have repeatedly protested against the abduction of young people.

* On January 15, K.C. Saranga, a programmer for Derana TV, was severely beaten by a mob in the Colombo suburb of Dehiwela. His video footage relating to a recent operation by STF commandos in Eastern Province was

seized in the course of the attack.

* Three journalists have fled the country after receiving death threats. They are Anuruddha Lokuhapuarachchi, a Reuters photographer and journalist; Rohitha Bhasana Abeywardana, a freelance reporter; and S. Rajkumar, president of the Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance and the Colombo news manager of the UK-based Theepam TV.

* The Karuna group, an armed militia led by V. Muralitharan or Karuna who split from the LTTE in 2004, has banned the distribution of the Colombo-based Tamil newspapers *Veerakerari* and *Thinakkural* in the eastern district of Batticaloa. Karuna's outfit collaborates closely with the Sri Lankan military.

These cases underline the hypocrisy of President Rajapakse's claims to allow press freedoms. He told a public meeting on January 5 that he defended the media's right to criticise his government. "I have even instructed government newspapers and Rupavahini [state-owned TV] to criticise if there is anything to be criticised," he declared. He also promised police inquiries into the attacks on journalists. The pledge is just as empty as all his other promises to investigate atrocities carried out by the security forces and associated thugs.

For the most part, the Sri Lankan media establishment has lined up behind the renewed civil war and acts as little more than a mouthpiece for the government's chauvinist propaganda. Rajapakse is distinctly nervous that any critical reporting of the war, rampant official corruption, worsening living standards and attacks on democratic rights will only inflame popular discontent, including in the military's ranks. That is the reason for the escalating crackdown on the media.



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