

Sri Lankan defence secretary menaces newspaper editor

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In a further attack on democratic rights, Sri Lanka's defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse last week threatened the editor of the English language *Daily Mirror* over two articles in its April 16 and 17 editions—the first dealing the activities of a pro-government militia, known as the Karuna group, and the second with the appalling conditions facing Tamil refugees in the East.

The threat is the latest in a long line of steps by the government to suppress any criticism of the military and its offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The defence secretary is the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, who has plunged the island back to war since winning office in November 2005.

After the articles were published, an enraged Gotabhaya Rajapakse telephoned the newspaper's editor Champika Liyanarachchi, who reported him as saying: "Don't be surprised if the Karuna faction turns violent against you. If that happens don't expect any security from the government to protect yourself."

Rajapakse then demanded that the editor resign or he would force management to dismiss her on the grounds of preventing a reprisal against the newspaper. Referring to journalist Uditha Jayasinghe, who wrote one of the articles, the defence secretary bluntly told Liyanarachchi: "I'll exterminate her".

In Sri Lanka, such comments cannot be regarded as idle threats. Over the past year, nine media workers, mostly Tamil journalists, have been murdered in circumstances that strongly suggest the involvement of the military or associated paramilitaries such as the Karuna group. Rajapakse's refusal to provide protection is tantamount to an invitation for a physical attack on the newspaper and its editor.

The article on April 16 entitled "Armed Karuna faction running its writ in Pottuvil" graphically exposed the government's lie that the security forces are not

cooperating with the Karuna group. Muslims in the eastern town of Pottuvil angrily told the *Daily Mirror* that Karuna's armed thugs move around freely, threatening people and extorting money. A coalition known as the Peace Secretariat for Muslims (PSM) had protested to the government and the international co-chairs of the peace process to no avail.

"Maintaining law and order is the duty of the police, and in special cases the army has a role to play. But in Pottuvil the police, including the STF (police commandos) and the army have become mere bystanders while the Karuna group is running the writ through the town," a PSM spokesman told the newspaper.

The Rajapakse government has repeatedly rejected the LTTE's demands to disarm paramilitaries such as the Karuna group as required by the 2002 ceasefire agreement, claiming that they were not operating in areas under government control. The *Daily Mirror* confirmed the security forces are allowing the Karuna group and other militias to openly threaten and extort. Behind the scenes, they undoubtedly operate with sections of the military in carrying out far greater crimes, including abduction and murder.

The second article, written on April 17 by Uditha Jayasinghe, was titled "Muttur IDPs [Internally Displaced Persons]: Battling a man-made tsunami in the guise of war". It explained the appalling conditions confronting refugees as a result of the military's offensives in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts. Its interviews and comments undermined the government's claims to be conducting "humanitarian missions" to assist people "trapped" in LTTE-areas.

The reality is that since last July the army has conducted a series of aggressive operations to seize LTTE territory in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. To stampede the local population, the military has deliberately shelled and bombed civilian areas, resulting in hundreds of deaths and

driving hundreds of thousands to flee. These refugees are now living from hand to mouth without adequate food, shelter and medicine in camps throughout the East. Those displaced from Muttur have been living in such conditions since last August.

After the *Daily Mirror* made his comments public, the defence secretary lamely denied threatening the newspaper's editor, saying all that was involved was a "frank exchange of ideas". Writing on the defence ministry web site, Rajapakse claimed he had told Liyanarachchi the two articles were "detrimental to the national security". One article, he stated, promoted "racial hatred", while "the other was trying to damage the good image of the Security Forces".

What is clear from Rajapakse's comments is that, in the name of "national security," the government and the military are demanding an end to all, even the most limited, criticism of the war. The threats against the *Daily Mirror* are a further warning of the methods being used. Under the current state of emergency, President Rajapakse has extensive powers to muzzle the media, but has refrained from using them to avoid provoking further political opposition.

The Editors Guild of Sri Lanka issued a statement, declaring: "We consider this a serious threat to media freedom and also to editorial independence.... The Guild totally condemns the behaviour of a senior government official." The Free Media Movement (FMM) also criticised the remarks, stating: "Given the volatile situation in the country, the FMM also fears that this threat sends a chilling message to the media community at large in Sri Lanka."

President Rajapakse has attempted to repair the political damage. According to the newspaper, he telephoned Liyanarachchi and "promised an investigation" into the threats. The *Daily Mirror* responded by hailing the initiative and promoting the illusion that the president, unlike his brother and other officials, was seriously interested in peace.

"At a time when President Rajapakse is engaged in the arduous task of uniting the country to bring much desired peace, the behaviour of this nature on the part of his trusted lieutenants, could be condemned as attempts at cutting ground from under his feet," the editorial stated. It has also noted that Karuna had informed Liyanarachchi that his group would not harm her.

Like Rajapakse's claims to be "a man of peace", his efforts to parade as a champion of media rights are simply window dressing. A statement by the government's

Media Centre for National Security (MCNS) continued the campaign against the *Daily Mirror*, provocatively declaring: "The government believes that the latest allegation against the defence secretary is part of a wide plan to remove him from office to satisfy the aims of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam."

The government's assault on the media is in fact intensifying. Just one day before Liyanarachchi was threatened, Subash Chandrabose, editor of the magazine *Nilam* and a contributor to other Tamil news media, was killed in the northern border town of Vavuniya.

Standard Newspapers, which published a leading Sinhalese-language weekly *Mawbima* and the English-language weekly *Sunday Standard*, was forced to cease operations on March 29 after the government froze the company's assets. The Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) of the police arrested the company's spokesman and financial director, Dushyantha Basnayake, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and has detained him without charge since February 27.

During the past year, *Mawbima* reported on government corruption and human rights violations. Its journalists questioned the government's role in the spiralling number of abductions and "disappearances" as fighting between the military and the LTTE escalated. The media group belongs to a friend of former senior minister Mangala Samaraweera who was sacked in February after falling out with the President Rajapakse. Both the president and the defence secretary accused *Mawbima* of supporting the LTTE and undermining "national security".

These measures against the media are part of a wider attack on the democratic rights of ordinary working people. As it intensifies the war and the accompanying assault on living standards, the Rajapakse government cannot tolerate any criticism or exposure of its lies.



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