Sri Lankan government blocks Tamil website

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In another act of media censorship, the Sri Lankan government has blocked Internet access to Tamilnet.com since June 15. The website makes no secret of its sympathy for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but covers a range of topics, including reports on the escalating war and the Sri Lankan military abuse of democratic rights, including hundreds of "disappearances" and murders. Many Tamilnet articles are straightforward reports of clashes, government and military actions, and acts of repression against Tamils.

The government media and websites are a marked contrast. All news of the war is heavily vetted by the Media Centre for National Security, which deliberately plays down military losses, denies any abuse of democratic rights by the security forces and promotes the "war on terrorism". Since restarting the civil war after coming to power in November 2005, President Mahinda Rajapakse has repeatedly insisted that the rest of the media toe the government's propaganda line in the name of "national security".

As it has come under increasing criticism, internationally and at home, over its human rights record, the Rajapakse government has resorted to increasingly heavy-handed methods of censorship to silence any alternative news sources. When asked at a press briefing whether the government was blocking the Tamilnet website, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said it was "news" to him. In the same breath, however, he hinted at the government's intentions, adding: "I would love to hire some hackers."

Media Minister Anura Priyadharshana Yapa also denied any government move to block Tamilnet. Speaking at a weekly press briefing on June 20, he declared: "It is unreasonable to level charges against the government. We have nothing to do with this."

Internet service providers in Sri Lanka have, however, exposed these statements as lies. The help desk at Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT), the country's largest Internet service provider, confirmed that the government had asked it to prevent access to Tamilnet. SLT employees explained: "Except Tamilnet you can access any other website." A spokesman for Dialog Telekom, a privately owned service, told Reuters: "We have blocked it as per a government directive". Fearing reprisals, he requested his name be withheld.

As it has escalated its war against the LTTE, the military and associated Tamil paramilitaries have increasingly targeted the Tamil media. In April 2005, Tamilnet editor and *Daily Mirror* columnist, Dharmaratnam Sivaram was abducted in central Colombo and murdered. His body was found inside the High Security Zone (HSZ) of the parliamentary complex, strongly suggesting the involvement of the security forces. Over the past 18 months, nine media workers, including five journalists, mostly Tamils, have been killed. Others have been detained without trial under the country's draconian anti-terror laws.

Last month Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse criticised *Daily Mirror* editor Champika Liyanarachchi for publishing articles about the conditions of refugees and the collaboration of the paramilitary group headed by Karuna, or V. Muralitharan, with the security forces. In a menacing threat, Rajapakse warned that Liyanarachchi might face reprisals from the Karuna group and should not ask for the government's protection. In March, the government froze the bank accounts of Standard News Papers, forcing the company to halt publication of its Sinhala and English language weeklies—*Mawbima* and the *Sunday Standard*.

Intimidation and violence against the media is continuing. On June 28, K. P. Mohan, a journalist with the Tamil language *Thinakural* was severely assaulted by air force personnel at a checkpoint in the central

Colombo after attending a media conference. He was injured and hospitalised at the Colombo National Hospital. Mohan told the media that he was sworn at for being a Tamil.

Representatives of 11 international media rights groups, including the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), International Press Institute (IPI), Reporters without Borders (RSF) and Sri Lanka's Free Media Movement (FMM), recently conducted a probe into the Sri Lankan government's abuse of media rights.

At a press conference on June 22, IFJ director Jacqueline Park expressed the group's concern over the "continued targetted killing of media workers". She added: "What's most worrying is the impunity, the fact that none of these cases are being investigated and being brought to court... Our message is very clear. The responsibility for creating a secure working environment lies with the government and it needs to do this by not tolerating any attacks or killings of journalists and media workers."

RSP representative Vincent Brossel said: "What we found is in the government-controlled areas there is a general feeling of fear and it has a huge impact on the way the people living in the Jaffna region can get access to information". While also critical of the LTTE, he blamed the government for not having the "political will to investigate such crimes" against media workers.

The Rajapakse government and the military will not investigate the killing of journalists and media employees, or hundreds of "disappearances" and murders, because they are intimately involved in this brutal repression. Defence spokesman Rambukwella's comment that he would be willing to hire "hackers," presumably not just to block but to sabotage the Tamilnet website, is just one more indication of the Colombo government's lawlessness.

In the guise of waging a "war on terror," President Mahinda Rajapakse has restarted the country's vicious communal war and is seeking to stamp out any, even limited, criticisms of its actions by any and all available means.

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