

Sri Lanka: Armed gang sets fire to newspaper printshop

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An armed gang broke into and set ablaze the printshop of Leader Publications, south of Colombo, in the early hours of November 21. While no group has claimed responsibility, the circumstances strongly point to the involvement of the security forces or associated paramilitaries and thugs.

This open thuggery against a newspaper publisher is a part of growing attack on the media unleashed under President Mahinda Rajapakse with the escalation of the renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Leader Publications, which publishes two English-language newspapers, the *Sunday Leader* and *Morning Leader*, and a Sinhala weekly, *Irudina*, has been highly critical of the Rajapakse government. In recent months, its outlets have carried a number of articles about corruption in public institutions, the government's underhand political and money dealings, the activities of pro-government paramilitaries and violations of human rights.

These exposures reflect the views of sections of the ruling elite and big business who have concerns that the expansion of the civil war could produce deepening social unrest and political opposition as well as military disasters and economic difficulties.

According to eyewitnesses, the attackers, armed with automatic rifles, pistols and clubs, stormed into the Leader premises around 2.00 a.m. on November 21 and set fire to machinery, bundles of the *Morning Leader* about to be delivered and rolls of printing paper. Part of the roof was also damaged.

A security officer, R Karunaratna, told the WSW: "Firstly four people entered the premises, forcibly jumping over the gate. They took me by my shirt collar and forced me to open the gate. Then another eight or nine people entered while two watched near the gate.

Then they dragged me to the press and ordered me at gun point to kneel down on the ground. They had come by a jeep and a van."

Chandana, a machine operator, said: "They [the attackers], except two, were masked with black cloths. They searched everywhere and brought workers to the front. We were ordered to kneel down at gunpoint. Three of us were attacked with clubs. They snatched six mobile phones and three purses in workers' pockets. Then they poured petrol on the machinery, on bundles of *Morning Leader* and paper rolls, and blasted something like a bomb. They finished their job in around 15 minutes."

The Leader premises are located in a high-security zone. Ratmalana airport, the Air Force base and housing complex are about a kilometre away. The Kotelawala Defence Academy and an Army camp are also nearby. Military checkpoints guard several local junctions.

Colombo is already in a state of high security alert. In high-security zones around key buildings and military installations, restrictions and checks are even tighter. For a heavily armed gang to move into such an area without the cooperation or complicity of the security forces is highly improbable.

Every circumstance—the location, the time, the weapons and the professional methods employed by the gang—points to a connection to the security forces and related paramilitaries.

Sunday Leader chief editor Lasantha Wickrematunga accused the Rajapakse government. "It is a cowardly attack within a high security zone by a regime that is acting like a terrorist organisation," he told the media. The signs of government involvement is so obvious that opposition United National Party leader Ranil Wickremasinghe also blamed the government.

Leader Publications has been repeatedly targeted due to its pro-opposition stance. A spokeswoman told the WSWS: “This is the second time our premises have been burned. The first was in October 2005, in the midst of the presidential election. The police took some people on suspicion but they were released later. Now two years have passed but the police have failed to bring the culprits to the book.

“They [the attackers] have done serious damage this time. It is clear the aim behind the attack is to disrupt the publishing of our papers. At the moment we cannot say exactly who has done this, but it is a part of continuous harassment.”

She referred to frequent questioning by officers from the police criminal investigation department (CID) about various reports in Leader newspapers and the CID’s arrest of one of the group’s journalists, Arthur Wamanan, a few weeks ago over bogus ransom charges made by a government minister.

Journalists along with local and international media organisations have condemned the November 21 attack. The Free Media Movement of Sri Lanka denounced it “with outrage”. More than a hundred journalists demonstrated in front of Colombo port railway station on November 23.

The International Press Institute (IPI) blamed the government. IPI director Johann P. Fritz said: “This latest attack on Leader Publications bears all the hallmarks of a highly organised attempt by groups close to the government to silence any critical reporting.” The IPT has again placed the country on its global watch list for violations of media freedom.

The Rajapakse government has denied responsibility for the attack. In what has now become a standard excuse, Media Minister Anura Priyadarsana Yapa immediately claimed that the attack was “an attempt to embarrass the government and tarnish the good image of the president”. He added that the president had asked the authorities “to bring to book the culprits”.

The government’s record indicates that the opposite will occur. Since President Rajapakse came to office in November 2005, 13 journalists have been killed—three this year alone. A number of newspaper offices, particularly those of Tamil-language papers, including *Sudaroli* in Jaffna and *Udayan* in Colombo, have been attacked several times. In early November, a *E-thalaya* web site journalist, Kumudu Champika Jayawardena,

was shot by two unidentified gunmen and critically injured. Official investigations have failed to identify or charge anyone for these crimes.

In October, the government rescinded the licence of the privately-owned ABC radio network for “false and irresponsible” news broadcasting. This was despite the network’s immediate correction of a report that armed men had infiltrated into Ranminithenna town, 260 km south east of Colombo. On October 29, the government introduced draconian emergency laws in the name of “national security”, severely censoring reporting on military procurements and operations, but had to withdraw the legislation because of public opposition.

The government and the Sinhala extremist parties, such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) have been conducting a continuous campaign against the media. The latest attack on Leader Publications came just two days after the government rammed what can only be described as a war budget through parliament with a thin majority of just 16 votes. The ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SFLP) and its allies resorted to an hysterical fear campaign, depicting those who opposed the budget as LTTE supporters.

Amid mounting dissatisfaction among working people over poverty, unemployment, attacks on democratic rights and the war, the Rajapakse government cannot tolerate any, even limited, political opposition. The November 21 attack was a signal that it will not hesitate to take violent measures in dealing with its opponents.



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