

Sri Lankan journalists protest against abduction and torture of colleague

Our correspondents
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Around 200 journalists took part in a lunch-hour demonstration at a busy junction in Colombo on May 23 to protest over the abduction and beating of Keith Noyahr, the associate editor of the *Nation*, an English-language weekly. A heavy security presence of more than 100 police, including several high-ranking officers, had been mobilised to deter demonstrators from marching toward Temple Trees, the president's official residence.

The protest was organised by five media organisations, including the Sri Lankan Working Journalists Association and Free Media Movement. Protesters demanded a full investigation to determine who abducted and assaulted Noyahr and accused the government of being involved in repeated attacks on the media and journalists, including Noyahr's abduction.

The identity of those responsible for torturing Noyahr is yet to be established, but it is likely that members of the Sri Lankan military or associated paramilitaries and thugs were involved. His abduction is the latest in a long line of attacks, carried out with the tacit government support, to suppress the media and journalists in the wake of President Mahinda Rajapakse's renewed war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Noyahr, who is defence correspondent for the *Nation*, spoke briefly to the WWSW from his hospital bed at the National Hospital in Colombo. He was abducted at about 10 p.m. on May 22 near his house at Dehiwela on the outskirts of Colombo city. A van had followed him home. Three men handcuffed and blindfolded him then dragged him into the van, which drove for about an hour.

Noyahr was beaten severely with wooden poles. He was dumped near his house the following morning at about 4 a.m. He is still in pain with injuries to the back of his head and ear, and bruises near his right eye and both sides of his jaw. His back and legs were badly beaten. His wrists were injured by the handcuffs.

The fact that he was dumped near his home points to the

collusion of the security forces. The police and military have established checkpoints at virtually every major junction throughout Colombo and surrounding suburbs. Vehicles are routinely stopped and searched—particularly in the early hours of the morning. That the abductors were not concerned strongly suggests high-level military or police involvement.

According to Noyahr, his interrogators wanted him to reveal his sources for articles on military matters. Although a supporter of the war, Noyahr has been critical of high-ranking officers and the way in which the government has conducted the war. He was threatened with severe reprisals if he reported publicly what his abductors wanted to know.

Journalists at last Friday's protest thought Noyahr's May 11 column in the *Nation* may have prompted his abduction. Headlined "An army is not its commander's private fiefdom," the article criticised the conduct of army chief Major General Sarath Fonseka. Noyahr's family told the media he had received several threats following its publication and had taken precautions.

The Rajapakse government and the military are not prepared to tolerate any criticism, no matter how limited, of the security forces. In comments on state-owned television earlier this month, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is also the president's brother, lashed out at journalists who published reports "harmful towards the security forces and military operations" as "media traitors". He demanded the banning of such media.

In an interview with *Irida Lankadeepa* in January, the defence secretary called for full censorship of military matters, arguing that "there is no need to report anything on the military". Army commander Fonseka told *Dinamina* on January 2, that media which refused to toe the government's line were "unpatriotic" and "the biggest obstacle" to military's war efforts.

After President Rajapakse ordered offensives in July 2006 to seize LTTE territory, the military won some quick victories in the East. Over the past year, however, the army's efforts to overrun the LTTE's remaining strongholds in the North have bogged down. The military suffered heavy casualties in a failed offensive last month near Muhamalai. The cost of the war is impacting on living standards, producing rising popular discontent.

Noyahr's article on May 11 accused General Fonseka of favoritism in promoting and awarding medals to senior officers. One example was Brigadier Samantha Sooriyabandara who was placed in charge of the main 53 strike Division in Jaffna without "the required experience" and commanded the troops involved in the Muhamalai disaster.

While personal antagonisms and rivalries are undoubtedly involved, sharp tensions are clearly emerging within the military hierarchy as the war drags on. The Rajapakse government, which has banked heavily on a quick victory against the LTTE, is nervous at any public criticism of the military, even from those supporting the war.

State repression of the media, including the abduction and murder of journalists and attacks on print shops, has been on the rise since Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency in November 2005. While censorship has not formally been invoked, the government has repeatedly warned the media not to deviate from the propaganda released by the military.

For the period from May 2007 to May 2008, the Free Media Movement has documented two murders, two abductions (not including Noyahr) and 15 arrests involving media workers or journalists. In the same period, five radio channels had their licences suspended. According to the International Federation of Journalists, six journalists were killed in Sri Lanka during 2007.

The most notorious incidents include:

* On May 19 this year, a group of employees with Sirasa TV covering the Vesak Full Moon celebrations was assaulted by thugs in the Colombo suburb of Kiribathgoda. Labour Minister Mervin Silva is the organiser for the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the Kiribathgoda area and is particularly hostile to Sirasa TV for its coverage of his thuggish methods.

* On March 17, President Rajapakse ordered the military to suppress a strike by employees of the state-owned television network, Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC). The strike was provoked by the government's failure to take action against Labour

Minister Silva who burst into the television station in December, demanding to know why one of his speeches had not been broadcast. His thugs assaulted a news director. Two days after the strike was suppressed, Rajapakse appointed a retired army general to oversee the SLRC.

* On March 7, J.S. Tissainayagam, a columnist with the *Sunday Times* and the editor of the *Outreach* web site, was arrested by the notorious Terrorist Investigation Division of the police. He is still in detention, more than two months after his arrest, and has not been charged.

* On November 21, an armed gang broke into the print shop of Leader Publications, south of Colombo, and set it ablaze. The publishing house produces several newspapers critical of the Rajapakse government on issues of corruption, the violation of democratic rights and the activities of pro-government paramilitaries.

* Last year, Iqbal Athas, the defence columnist for the *Sunday Times*, was forced to go into hiding after the military pointedly removed his security detail. He received threats following the publication of columns pointing to high-level corruption, including by a Rajapakse family member, in the purchase of MIG fighters for the air force. Like Noyahr, Athas is a supporter of the war, whose criticisms reflect unease within the defence establishment itself.

In a bid to dampen criticism of Noyahr's abduction, the President Rajapakse has ordered the police chief to launch an investigation. But if the government's past record is any guide, the inquiry will be a whitewash. Similar "investigations" into the murder, abduction and assault of journalists and media workers have not resulted in any arrests or convictions.



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