

Journalists flee Sri Lanka amid violent attacks and government threats

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Just two weeks after the killing of Lasantha Wickrematunge, the editor of the *Sunday Leader*, another Sri Lankan editor has been stabbed and beaten by a gang. The incident came amid further warning signs that the government and the military are seeking to intimidate the media as part of a wholesale attack on democratic rights.

On January 23, a four-member motorbike death squad stopped the car of Upali Tennakoon, editor of *Rivira*, a weekly Sinhala-language paper, near his house at Imbulgoda, a Colombo suburb. The gang smashed the windows of the car with iron bars and started attacking Tennakoon, who was shielded by his wife, Dhammika Tennakoon. As people gathered, the assailants fled.

While Tennakoon and his wife escaped with bruises and cuts, the editor could have been killed. The gang's methods resembled the assassination of Wickrematunge, whose car was also stopped by four masked killers on motorbikes. In both cases, the assailants fled unhindered through the network of military checkpoints erected throughout the country, indicating that they were from army-backed death squads.

Why Tennakoon was targeted is not yet clear. *Rivira*, a privately-owned publication whose owners include members of President Mahinda Rajapakse's family, has supported the communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and not criticised the government.

Two media ministers, Anura Priyadarshana Yapa and Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena, immediately declared

that there was a conspiracy behind the attacks on the media to embarrass the government, just as it was claiming victory over the LTTE. Some analysts suggested that the assault on Tennakoon was a government-backed bid to divert attention from the murder of Wickrematunge, whose newspaper had criticised the government's conduct of the war and exposed corrupt deals involving the defence hierarchy and ministers. In a posthumously-published *Sunday Leader* editorial, Wickrematunge accused Rajapakse of responsibility for his death.

Whatever the exact circumstances, the assault on Tennakoon was designed to further terrorise the media. Two days before Wickrematunge's assassination, thugs ransacked and torched a television station, MTV/Sirasa, which had been accused of not giving enough coverage to the military's recent capture of Kilinochchi, the LTTE's de-facto capital.

On January 14, just a week after the MTV/Sirasa attack, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, one of the president's brothers, branded the TV station and its journalists as LTTE terrorists or supporters. Gotabhaya Rajapakse claimed that the ransacking was an "inside job" to claim insurance and declared the television channel was the "Voice of Tigers" (the name of the LTTE radio channel).

The defence secretary denounced MTV news editor Chevan Daniel for giving an interview to CNN criticising police's failure to apprehend the culprits. "He (Daniel) is a terrorist," Rajapakse added. "I will put in jail this person who spoke to the CNN". The next day, the police criminal investigation department launched a manhunt for Daniel, but he had already left the country,

aware of the impending threat.

In his interview, the defence secretary also accused Munusamy Parameshwari, a Tamil journalist for the Sinhala weekly *Mawbima* (Motherland) newspaper, of being a "suicide cadre of the LTTE". During 2007, she was abducted by the police Special Task Force and detained for nearly three months under anti-terrorism provisions before being released without charge.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse's utterances offer clear encouragement for further attacks on the media. The government is using Sinhala chauvinism and the war in the North and East to brand critics, political opponents and any workers and youth who fight for their rights as LTTE "terrorists" or sympathisers.

Over the past three weeks, a dozen journalists and media activists have fled the country. They include Iqbal Athas, an internationally-recognised *Sunday Times* columnist, Sanath Balasuriya and Poddala Jayantha of the state-run Lake House, Sunanda Deshapriya and Uvindu Kurukulasuriya of the Free Media Movement, Upul Joseph Fernando and Rathnapala Gamage of *Lankadeepa*, and Anuruddha Lokuhappuarachchi, a Reuters reporter based in Colombo.

A host of journalists previously left the country and the media has indicated many more will follow. Answering a parliamentary question last week, cabinet minister Dinesh Gunawardena admitted that nine journalists had been killed and 27 assaulted since the Rajapakse took office in January 2006. Four journalists were abducted, one of whom is still missing.

A police attempt to blame government opponents for the latest media attacks was exposed last week. Police had arrested Suraj Anthony Jayasuriya, leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP) on the Kotte Municipal Council and four supporters. Police said they had received an anonymous call from an unidentified person who said he saw weapons being moved from Jayasuriya's vehicle.

On January 19, magistrate Wasantha Jinadasa granted bail to the five "suspects", saying the police had

maliciously implicated them to divert attention in a misleading direction. He ordered the police to make further investigations.

Nevertheless, the government's offensive is continuing. Last week, a special police team questioned Sandaruwan Senadheera, the editor of *Lanka-e-news*, an independent news web site, on a complaint made by the defence secretary. Under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism legislation, the defence secretary has wide powers to detain anyone for up to 18 months on "suspicion" of engaging in terrorist activities or supporting terrorism.

In March 2007, J.S. Tissanayagam, a *Sunday Times* columnist and editor of the *Outreach* web site, was arrested along with the E-quality Printing Press owners, V. Jesiharan and his wife V. Valarmathi. All are still in detention. The US-based Human Rights Watch last week called on the government to drop the charges against Tissanayagam, who was indicted five months after his arrest under an anti-terrorism law for articles he wrote about issues confronting Sri Lanka's Tamils.

The attacks and threats directed against the media are part of the government's moves toward a police state. Unable to address the social crisis confronting working people, the government is exploiting the war to intensify communal divisions, to trample on fundamental democratic rights and to intimate and suppress any political opposition.

The author recommends:

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