

Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan death squads kill editor and ransack TV station

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13 January 2009

Two brazen attacks on the media in Sri Lanka last week constitute a sharp warning that the government and the military will not tolerate any, even limited, criticism of its communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Last Thursday, Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the *Sunday Leader*, was shot dead in broad daylight as he drove to work on a busy suburban road. According to eyewitnesses, four masked gunmen rode up to his car on motorbikes. One blocked the path of the vehicle while another smashed a hole in the windscreen and shot Wickrematunge with a pistol. The two others stood guard. All four escaped, even though the spot was 100 metres from an air force checkpoint and next to a high security zone.

Two days earlier, an armed gang broke into the MTV/Sirasa broadcasting network in the early hours of the morning, overpowered the guards and ransacked the building. Some 20 masked gunmen armed with automatic rifles, pistols, hand grenades and a mine destroyed the control room and shot up the offices and studios. Despite being called, the police did not arrive until the 30-minute rampage was over. Speaking to the WSWS, news director Asoka Dias denounced the raid as "an attack on media freedom".

Both incidents have the hallmarks of assaults by military-sponsored gangs of thugs, which have been responsible over the past three years for hundreds of abductions, murders and violent attacks directed against the country's Tamil minority and anyone critical of the government and the war. Last week's attacks took place as President Mahinda Rajapakse was whipping up a wave of reactionary triumphalism following the army's capture of the LTTE's headquarters in Kilinochchi the previous week.

The ability of Wickrematunge's killers to flee, and of 20 heavily armed gunmen to travel unimpeded at night, both point to the complicity of the security forces. The police and military

maintain a huge network of checkpoints and roadblocks throughout Colombo and the surrounding suburbs. Vehicles, passengers, even pedestrians are routinely stopped and checked. Moreover, the MTV/Sirasa attackers arrived in a white van without a number plate—the trademark of military death squads in Sri Lanka for decades.

Thousands took part in the funeral of Wickrematunge in Colombo yesterday, shouting slogans accusing the government of his death. The Paris-based Reporters without Borders (RSF) blamed the government for inciting hatred against the editor, noting that the president had branded him a "terrorist journalist" last October. In its statement condemning the killing, Amnesty International pointed out that during Rajapakse's tenure 14 media workers, including journalists, had been killed and 20 had fled the country due to threats.

Wickrematunge sympathised with the conservative opposition party—the United National Party (UNP)—and like the rest of the Colombo establishment backed the war against the LTTE. At the same time, however, Wickrematunge had been critical of the government and defence hierarchy about the way the war was carried out. The *Sunday Leader* had exposed instances of high-level corruption involving top generals and ministers.

Defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, a brother of the president, had filed a defamation case against Wickrematunge that was being heard in the district courts. The case, in which Gotabhaya Rajapakse was claiming a billion rupees in damages, involved a *Sunday Leader* article exposing corruption in a defence deal.

At the same time, Wickrematunge's criticisms reflected concerns in sections of the Colombo elite at Rajapakse's increasingly autocratic methods of rule, including his sidelining of parliament and dependence on the military. Well aware that he was a target, Wickrematunge wrote his own death notice published as the editorial in last weekend's *Sunday Leader* in

which he likened Sri Lanka to Nazi Germany.

Wickrematunge directly addressed the president, noting the two had previously been long-time friends. "In the wake of my death I know you [Rajapakse] will make all the usual sanctimonious noises and call upon the police to hold a swift and thorough inquiry. But like all the inquiries you have ordered in the past, nothing will come of this one, too. For truth be told, we both know who will be behind my death...

"Sadly, for all the dreams you had for our country in your younger days, in just three years you have reduced it to rubble. In the name of patriotism you have trampled on human rights, nurtured unbridled corruption and squandered public money like no other President before you... [No one else has] caused so much blood to be spilled on this land as you have, or trampled on the rights of citizens as you do."

Taken in the context of Sri Lanka where governments have trampled on democratic rights and shed blood for decades, the editorial written by a former friend is an extraordinary indictment of the Rajapakse regime. Under Rajapakse, power has been concentrated to an unprecedented extent in the hands of a political-military cabal that broke the 2002 ceasefire, re-launched communal war and used it to justify the gross abuse of democratic rights. Wickrematunge spoke for sections of the political establishment who fear that such methods will ultimately provoke a massive backlash by working people.

In the case of MTV/Sirasa, the government has gone one step further, attempting to blame the opposition UNP. Police, purportedly acting on an anonymous tip off, have arrested a UNP municipal councillor, alleging that he helped transfer the weapons involved in the attack. Neither the government nor the police has offered any explanation as to why the councillor or the UNP would be involved in ransacking a television station critical of Rajapakse.

The attack came in the wake of denunciations of MTV/Sirasa in the state-run media for its "unpatriotic" attitude. The station's coverage, the government mouthpieces declared, did not give sufficient coverage of the army's victory at Kilinochchi and gave too much prominence to an LTTE suicide bombing in Colombo on the same day. Like the *Sunday Leader*, MTV/Sirasa fully backs the war but has been critical of government corruption and abuses.

For all the government's fanfare about the army's victories over the LTTE, the attack on MTV/Sirasa and Wickrematunge's murder demonstrate just how weak the Rajapakse regime is. Last Friday, announcing the army's capture of the strategic Elephant Pass on national television, the president was preoccupied with conspirators who were trying to

"belittle these victories, to turn the attention of the people to other directions".

"The aim of these conspirators is to level unfounded charges against the army commander who works with the greatest dedication to achieve these victories," Rajapakse declared. They were seeking to "destroy the morale of troops, destabilise the country" in order to "make room for various international forces to interfere to grab our gains away from us".

Not surprisingly, Rajapakse failed to name the conspirators or provide any concrete detail about this conspiracy. His paranoia reflects above all a fear of the broad masses of working people who have been forced to bear the costs of the war and now confront rapidly worsening living standards as a result of the global economic downturn.

The army's victories have not been accompanied by widespread popular euphoria. On the orders of the government, state institutions including schools were compelled to "celebrate" the Kilinochchi victory. Various Sinhala chauvinist organisations held relatively small rallies. But among working people, despite considerable confusion, there was just the hope that the 25-year war would soon be over and life might improve.

It is precisely these expectations that the government is incapable of fulfilling. Coming in the wake of Wickrematunge's assassination, Rajapakse's obsession with "conspirators" is the sharpest possible warning of the measures that will be used to suppress any opposition. If the army does capture the LTTE's remaining strongholds, this "victory" will not bring "peace, freedom and democracy", as Rajapakse claimed after the fall of Kilinochchi, but police-state measures aimed against the working class.



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