

Sri Lankan newspaper editor held without charge

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The detention of N. Vithyatharan, the editor of the Tamil daily *Sudar Oli*, is another example of the police-state methods being used by the Sri Lankan government to silence any media criticism, in particular of its criminal war against the country's Tamil minority.

Vithyatharan was seized by police at a family funeral in the Colombo suburb of Mount Lavinia on February 26. Police spokesman Ranjith Gunasekera initially refused to acknowledge any police involvement, saying that the editor had been abducted by an unidentified group in a white van.

The official denial was particularly ominous as hundreds of people have been abducted or murdered over the past three years by death squads sanctioned by the security forces. The white van is their well-known trademark.

In a matter of hours, however, police changed their tune, admitting that Vithyatharan had been arrested by the Colombo Crimes Division and was being held at its headquarters. A Defence Ministry spokesman Lakshman Hulugalle told the media that the editor was detained in connection with a February 20 air attack on Colombo by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) with two light planes.

Vithyatharan is still being held without charge under the draconian provisions of the government's emergency powers.

James Ross, legal and policy director at the US-based Human Rights Watch, commented earlier this month: "Once again the government has arrested a Tamil

journalist on allegations that border on the absurd. And if the accounts of a beating are accurate, it shows the open contempt the government has for Sri Lanka's independent media."

The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has become increasingly sensitive to criticism as news of the army's killing of Tamil civilians in fighting in the North has been covered in the international media, provoking protests in a number of countries.

Well before the LTTE's air attack, the Colombo Criminal Division (CCD) had already grilled Vithyatharan on February 13 over two articles published in the *Sudar Oli*. The day before Vithyatharan's arrest, officers from the state intelligence unit searched the *Sudar Oli* office at Grandpass and asked for the names and contact numbers of all the newspaper's journalists. The newspaper's managing director, E. Saravanapavan, refused to provide any details.

Saravanapavan, who is also Vithyatharan's brother-in-law, told the WSWs what happened on the day of the arrest. "The abductors might have calculated that there would be only a handful of people at the funeral parlour by mid-morning. But quite a considerable number had arrived by 9.45 a.m. when the abductors crashed in. They had to face more people than they expected.

"When the three policemen in uniform started to drag Vithyatharan out through the gate of the parlour, relatives hung onto him and tried to pull him back into the building. Our people almost managed to free him after a tug-of-war. When this happened, three toughs in civvies jumped out of the vehicle in which the police

arrived and came running into the parlour. They began hitting us, causing injury to a number of our relatives. Then they forcibly dragged Vithyatharan away.

"Our people raised an outcry. We noted that the number plate of the white van was HX 0640. A few of us then got into a vehicle and started to follow the van. But we could not catch up with the abductors. Finding that our complaints to the police stations in the area were of no avail, I took steps to immediately inform the international news media and diplomatic missions as well as the police headquarters and also a number of ministers," Saravanapavan said.

As this was taking place, government spokesman L. Y. Abeywardene made a call to the media rights group, Reporters without Borders, at 11.45 a.m., saying that Vithyatharan was being held by police and was being interrogated, but his relatives would be able to visit him.

Saravanapavan explained: "After Vithyatharan was taken away, he was blindfolded and beaten severely on the feet and head, so badly that the CCD had to take him to a hospital to get his head x-rayed. His wife and children who saw him after they were notified by the police have been very disturbed by his condition."

If the government had not been forced to acknowledge Vithyatharan's arrest, it is quite possible that he could have been killed. As in hundreds of other cases, his murder would have been blamed on "unknown abductors" and after a perfunctory police investigation the case would have been closed. What stands out about Vithyatharan's abduction was its brazen character. It took place in broad daylight in front of scores of people and involved uniformed police officers.

Sudar Oli and its sister paper in the northern town of Jaffna, *Uthayan*, have been targetted before. Their offices have been attacked several times and six of their employees have been killed. Following Vithyatharan's arrest, senior staff have received threatening phone calls, telling them to leave the country or face the same fate.

The arrest of Vithyatharan followed the murder of *Sunday Leader* editor, Lasantha Wickrematunga, on January 8. Wickrematunga, who had been increasingly critical of the Rajapakse government, was shot in his car by unknown gunmen as he was travelling to work in Colombo. Two days earlier, armed thugs burst into the premises of the Sirasa TV station, smashing equipment and attacking staff. Police have made no arrests in either case.

According to the Sri Lankan media organisation Free Media Movement, 12 journalists have been killed in Sri Lanka since August 2005 and 27 are in detention.

Well-known journalist J.S. Tissainayagam has been detained for more than a year along with two colleagues, Vettivel Jasikaran and Vadivel Valamathy. The charges brought against Tissainayagam, some five months after he was detained, are blatantly political. He is accused of inciting communal disharmony in articles written in 2006 and 2007, as well as writing and raising money for the *North Eastern Monthly* magazine. The three each face up to 20 years' jail if found guilty.

For all its boasting about the army's victories over the LTTE, Rajapakse is confronting a deepening economic crisis and the prospect of widespread social unrest over mounting unemployment and deteriorating living standards. The government's repression of the media is a sharp warning of the measures that are being prepared more broadly against working people.



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