

Sri Lanka: Arrested Tamil editor speaks to the WSWs

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N. Vithyatharan, chief editor of the Tamil newspaper *Sudar Oli*, was released from detention on April 28, four days after police admitted in court that there were no grounds to charge him. His treatment further exposes the lawless character of the Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Vithyatharan had been accused of aiding a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) air raid on Colombo on February 20. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse had declared: “We have definite evidence that this person is a Tiger accomplice. He is a Tiger. We will charge him on his crimes. We consider anyone who defends him, also to be a Tiger.” The subsequent police admission showed these claims to be false.

After his release, Vithyatharan told the media: “The management of *Uthayan-Sudar Oli* and I have decided not to leave Sri Lanka... Instead, [we will] expose and fight for the Tamil community and their rights at this crucial time. We have decided to dedicate ourselves to that task, even though we risk our lives even when we leave our premises.”

As part of the government’s war against the LTTE, the police, military and allied paramilitary thugs have unleashed a terror campaign of abductions, disappearances, intimidation and killing, mostly directed at Tamils. They have targeted the media and any journalists who have made any criticism of the war or the government.

Vithyatharan was abducted on February 26 from a funeral parlour in Mount Lavinia, a Colombo suburb, in broad daylight while he was attending the last rites of a close relative. The police spokesman, Inspector Ranjith

Gunasekera, declared it to be just another abduction, like many others. After an international media alert, however, the abductors handed Vithyatharan over to the police.

On May 7 Vithyatharan told the WSWs: “It is evident that the perpetrators were closely coordinated by higher-ups. The Secretary to the Ministry of Defence [Gotabhaya Rajapakse], a leading person in the political set-up, is not only issuing the detention orders but also giving verdicts before the courts do.”

Describing his abduction, Vithyatharan said: “Three uniformed police officials and three thugs in civilian clothes handcuffed and blindfolded me. I was thrown onto the floor [of the vehicle] between the seats. They then stripped me and kept assaulting me, stamping on me with boots, and all the time scolding me with utter filth. I expected death at any moment at the hands of these thugs, just like many journalists in Sri Lanka.”

However the assault stopped after about half an hour. “I could hear them speaking over a hand phone and heard the speaker at the other end instruct them to switch on the radio. Over the radio, I heard the announcer mentioning my name and that I had been abducted.

“Then they freed my hands and handed back my possessions and stopped the vehicle. Pulling me out, they made me walk on a hard surface. After a few minutes I heard a door being unlocked. I was taken into a room.

“A familiar voice, one that sounded like Inspector Wijayaratne of the Colombo Crime Division, who had grilled me before my abduction, told me: ‘We arrested you because of mistaken identity. You will be released soon.’ After some time my blindfold was removed. I was given the impression that I would shortly be released.”

The time was 1 p.m.—more than three hours had passed since his abduction. He was allowed to phone his office. But soon the police officer in charge told him that he was under arrest, and being investigated about “the role that he had played” in the LTTE’s Colombo air attack a few weeks earlier.

The police showed him a letter from the Department of Military Intelligence (DMI) saying that the DMI had searched his telephone records and found reasons to suspect that he coordinated the LTTE operations in Colombo. The letter called for further investigations. “So the police remedied my illegal abduction by making a formal arrest,” Vithyatharan said.

Vithyatharan had been interrogated by the Colombo Criminal Division on February 13 about two articles published in the *Sudar Oli*. The day before his abduction, a group of intelligence unit officers searched the newspaper’s office and had asked for the names and contact numbers of all its journalists. The manager, E. Saravanapavan, refused to provide the details.

Senior staff at the *Sudar Oli* and its sister paper in Jaffna, *Uthayan*, later received telephone calls threatening them with the same fate as Vithyatharan if they did not leave the country. Since 2005, armed goons have attacked staff of both newspapers several times, killing six employees. In the midst of these attacks, the state withdrew Vithyatharan’s security protection in August 2006.

Vithyatharan is the 28th journalist detained in Sri Lanka since 2005. As noted by a recent report by Reporters without Borders, the attacks on the media, human rights groups and those with dissenting views intensified with the 2006 resumption of the war by President Mahinda Rajapakse regime. Attacks on journalists, including murder, have become frequent—12 journalists have been killed since 2006.

On January 6, a dozen heavily-armed men ravaged the studios of *MTV/Sirasa* on the outskirts of Colombo, the major non-state television station in the country. Two days later, Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the *Sunday Leader*, which had exposed government corruption, was bludgeoned to death at a suburban thoroughfare in broad daylight.

The regime still claims to have found no clue to Wickrematunge’s murder. Many other abductions and murders of journalists and political opponents of the regime have not been probed.

On May 6, the trial of J.S. Tissanayagam, another well-known journalist, commenced, more than one year after he had been detained. He was arrested in March last year while visiting the State Terrorist Investigation Division to see two colleagues who had been arrested the previous day—

Vettivel Jaseekaran and V. Valamathy. Jaseekaran was a former editor of the eastern Batticaloa-based *Thinakathir*, a Tamil newspaper.

Tissanayagam was kept in police custody without charges until last August. He was then charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for writing articles that allegedly “incited communal disharmony” and for raising funds for a magazine along with two colleagues. All three face up to 20 years’ imprisonment if convicted.

The regime has used its brutal war against the Tamil minority in the North and East of the island to take draconian measures against all opposition, branding any criticism of its repressive activity as traitorous. Far from ending the assault on basic democratic rights, however, it is already clear that the end of the war in the North will only herald wider attacks on government opponents.



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