

Sri Lanka: Leaked state intelligence hit list

Nanda Wickremesinghe, SEP candidate for Jaffna
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Lanka News Web reported earlier this month that “state intelligence units have drawn up a list of names of active journalists and NGOs [non government organisations]” and categorised them according to a points system. While the full list has not been published, those named are connected to organisations and media outlets critical of President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government.

In Sri Lanka, the existence of such a list is particularly menacing as government opponents and media critics have been targetted for detention or physical violence since Rajapakse first took office in late 2005. Hundreds of people have disappeared or been murdered by pro-government death squads operating with the complicity of the security forces.

At the top of the list on equal points are Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, executive director of the Centre of Policy Alternatives (CPA), and Krishantha Weliamuna, director of Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL). Others named in the *Lanka News Web* article include: Free Media Movement convener Sunil Jayasekera, *Lankaenews* editor Sandaruwan Senadhira and Joint Movement for Democracy convener Sudarshana Gunawardena.

Saravanamuttu and Weliamuna wrote to Rajapakse on March 4 expressing their grave concern about the *Lanka News Web* article. A subsequent CPA statement declared: “[I]n view of the fact that many of the persons identified in the report have previously been targetted by way of physical violence, death threats and misinformation campaigns, it is impossible not to register our utmost concern, in the broader context of the crisis that Sri Lanka faces in respect of democratic freedoms, law and order, and the rule of law.”

Amnesty International and the US-based Human Rights Watch both called for an end to government harassment of journalists and NGO activists. Asia director of Human Rights Watch, Brad Adams, said: “The Sri Lankan government is conducting a carefully coordinated witch hunt aimed at discrediting critics of the government. This is extremely dangerous and irresponsible in a country where journalists and activists have often been threatened and killed.”

An Amnesty International report noted: “In September 2008, unknown persons threw two grenades at the TISL director’s house. In August 2009, the director of the CPA received an anonymous death threat by mail. The authorities have failed to hold anyone accountable for either of the incidents.”

Both the *Lanka News Web* and *Lankaenews* have been blocked by the government in Sri Lanka. In addition, *Lankaenews* journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda disappeared shortly before the presidential election and has not been seen since.

The CPA and TISL were involved in monitoring the January 26 presidential election, in which Rajapakse defeated opposition candidate, retired general Sarath Fonseka, to win a second term. “This smacks of retaliation for reporting on violations during the presidential election,” Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director Sam Zarifi said.

The current campaign for the April 8 parliamentary elections is being held in a climate of intimidation and repression. Immediately after the presidential poll, the government launched a widespread crackdown, arresting opposition supporters, pro-opposition journalists and threatening and attacking trade unionists

in workplaces. On February 8, military police arrested Fonseka amid lurid, but unsubstantiated, government allegations that he was planning a coup against Rajapakse.

Amnesty International media director Mike Blakemore suggested that the government might have deliberately leaked the list to further intimidate political opponents. “Such a blatant leak can have only one purpose and that is to intimidate those individuals on the list and deter anyone from speaking to them,” he said.

The presidential secretariat issued a statement denying that any state intelligence list exists. The denial, however, has little credibility. The Rajapakse regime has flatly rejected all allegations of war crimes and gross human rights abuses despite considerable evidence to the contrary. None of those involved has been identified, arrested and prosecuted.

In 2006, Rajapakse restarted and ruthlessly waged the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). After the LTTE’s defeat last May, the government has kept in place the state of emergency and police-state measures built up in 26 years of conflict. During the war, Rajapakse accused his opponents of being traitors for undermining state security. Now he claims that any criticism of human rights abuses is part of an “international conspiracy” to undermine his government.

The media has been a particular target. Since the beginning of 2006, at least 14 media workers have been killed. In a blatant case in January last year, *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge was murdered in broad daylight while he was travelling to his office. His killers were able to flee on motorbike despite the heavy police and security presence in the area. No one has been charged and no post-mortem report has yet been made public. Other journalists have been assaulted, abducted or simply disappeared. More than 20 journalists have fled the country fearing for their lives.

While denying the existence of any intelligence hit list, the presidential secretariat statement indicated that

the abuse of democratic rights would continue. It declared that the police would continue to investigate suspected illegal or criminal activity without notifying those involved or revealing the extent of the inquiries.

The statement announced that the government was “preparing comprehensive legislation to govern the NGO/INGO activities in the country, as there are many instances of malpractice”. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake was more blunt. He recently told a meeting that “international and domestic groups” found to be “conspiring against the government” would be banned.

The government’s measures are not primarily aimed at NGOs, journalists or opposition politicians, but against working people. Rajapakse is preparing for a confrontation with the working class after the election when he will be compelled to implement the IMF’s drastic austerity requirements.



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