

Sri Lanka: Pro-government mob attacks media network offices

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A protest against Senegalese-born American rap singer Akon has become the latest pretext for a pro-government mob in Sri Lanka to attack the media—in this case, at the head office of the MTV/Sirasa media network in central Colombo on Monday. The incident is part of an ongoing campaign of intimidation and violence, and the government's broader assault on democratic rights.

About 200 protesters, bussed in from a Colombo suburb, hurled rocks at the offices and tried to enter the premises. They were repelled with high-pressure fire hoses. At least four station employees were injured and the offices were damaged along with several vehicles.

Akon, who was due to give a concert in Sri Lanka next month, has been targetted by Sinhala Buddhist extremists over a video clip in which he dances with a scantily dressed woman. The video, which was shot at Ibiza in Spain, also contains a barely recognisable Buddha statue in the distant background. Protesters have denounced the singer for disrespecting Buddhism.

With parliamentary elections on April 8, the government seized on the issue to stir up the Sinhala extremists among its base of support. The government denied Akon a visa, with its official website declaring that along with "this particular controversial video clip, some of Akon's lyrics are not suitable for public articulation". It provided no further details.

Akon appeared somewhat stunned. He apologised for any offence he might have caused and said he was disheartened to hear of the violent protest. He said he was not even aware of the presence of the statue in the clip. In reality, the rap singer has simply been caught

up in the government's continuing harassment and violence against any media that is at all critical of its policies and anti-democratic methods.

The pro-government protesters claimed they were targetting MTV/Sirasa because it was promoting the Akon concert. But the TV station was just one of a number of sponsors. Sirasa told the WSWs that one of their broadcasting services, *yes-FM*, provided sponsorship along with several other media and tourist companies. Platinum Entertainment was the event's main organiser in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau.

Monday's protest was well-organised, with obvious signs of government connivance. The thugs acted confidently without fear of being identified, hurling stones at the network's offices for nearly an hour.

Sirasa management immediately informed the police but it took an hour for a police riot squad to arrive and only after repeated calls. The area's police station is just two kilometres away. The police inaction is in contrast to its response to protests by students, workers, journalists or opposition activists. Riot squads are ready in advance, armed with batons, tear gas and automatic weapons.

In Monday's incident, the police arrested 16 people but all were bailed out early the following morning without being taken before a magistrate. On Wednesday and Thursday, Sirasa TV broadcast footage of the events. One segment showed a police jeep moving along the road near the mob and also parked in close proximity while the attack was in progress.

Sirasa has identified several individuals involved as pro-government members of the Pradeshiya Sabha (a local government body) in the suburbs of Colombo. Three buses attached to the Kelaniya depot of the state-owned passenger transport service were used to bring the protesters to central Colombo. According to police, two leading members of President Mahinda Rajapakse's party were among those arrested.

A cover-up is underway. Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena denied any government involvement in the protest. A news bulletin on the state-owned TV, however, falsely ascribed the violence to Sirasa staff, claiming that they had attacked a "peaceful demonstration" in front of its headquarters. President Rajapakse has ordered a "high level investigation," but, as in previous cases, it is unlikely that any of those involved will be prosecuted.

MTV/Sirasa has been singled out by pro-government thugs previously. In January last year, an armed gang broke into network's building 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. The attack followed denunciations of MTV/Sirasa in the state-run media for its "unpatriotic" attitude toward the government's war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). None of those involved has been arrested.

Monday's protest was designed to intimidate Sirasa/MTV and other media outlets. The government is shamelessly using the state-owned media to boost its campaign for the April 8 elections, without even the pretence of being even-handed, and is incensed that the private media companies are not doing the same. Several channels, including Sirasa/MTV, have given broadcast time to opposition parties and carried reports not favourable to the government.

Over the past four years under the Rajapakse regime, there have been a series of attacks on the media, as well as opposition politicians and political critics. Since the

beginning of 2006, at least 14 media workers have been killed. 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 via motorbike despite the heavy police and security presence in the area. No one has been charged.

Since the presidential elections in January, the government has launched a crackdown on political opposition, including the arrest of rival presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka and dozens of his supporters. The editor of *Lanka*, the newspaper of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), was detained and only released after a court challenge. *Lankaenews* website journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda disappeared just before presidential election and has not been seen since.

The incident on Monday is another reminder of the government's repressive methods. During the war, hundreds of people were abducted, beaten up or murdered by pro-government death squads operating with the complicity of the security forces. The attack on Sirasa TV and the murder of Lasantha Wickrematunge were part of the attempt to silence any criticism of the government and its criminal war. The assault on democratic rights has continued after the LTTE's defeat last May and will certainly intensify after the election as the government launches a major assault on living standards and seeks to suppress any opposition, particularly by the working class.



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