

# Arson attack on Sri Lankan opposition web site

**Our correspondents**  
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The office of the opposition *Lankaenews.com* web site at Malabe, a suburb of Colombo, was set on fire in the early hours of Monday morning. While the government has denied any responsibility, it is notorious for using thugs to attack its critics, including in the media.

Journalist Sanjaya Dasanayaka told the WSWS that a gang broke in around 2 a.m. They smashed down the front door and set fire to the office, destroying a library, a fax machine and a photocopier. Neighbours heard the noise, rushed to the site and put out the fire. Two *Lankaenews.com* journalists arrived at the office at about 5 a.m.

Neighbours told Dasanayaka that four unidentified persons arrived on motorbikes and asked about the location of “an office where people are working with computers”. The police later cordoned off the premises and prevented staff from entering, claiming that an investigation was underway. However, a government forensic analyst did not arrive within the 16-hour limit prescribed for crime scene examinations.

The *Lankaenews.com* has been repeatedly targeted by the government for its criticisms of President Mahinda Rajapakse and other top leaders over corruption. The web site backed Sarath Fonseka, the former army commander, who stood as the common opposition candidate against Rajapakse in the presidential election in January 2010.

Web site editor Sandaruwan Senadheera fled to Britain last year after receiving death threats. Journalist

Prageeth Eknaligoda disappeared just a few days before the presidential election and has not been found. Pro-government death squads working in collusion with the military have been responsible for hundreds of “disappearances” and murders over the past five years. As in other cases, the police have announced that their investigations have drawn a blank. Government authorities have also at times blocked the web site in Sri Lanka.

Journalist Dasanayaka told the WSWS: “Despite the disappearance of Eknaligoda and the forced exile of our editor Sandaruwan, we haven’t changed our style of writing. We have continued to write, which has angered the government. That may be the reason for this attack.... There is no one who would attack us for personal reasons. Someone who got hurt politically [by our writing] must be behind this.”

Dasanayaka cited two recent news items as a possible motive. One was an article criticising Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, for playing down the role of Fonseka in the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The other reported on President Rajapakse’s recent visit to the US and the state of his health.

Web site editor Senadheera told Agence France Presse: “A powerful section of the government has carried out this attack ... There is a concerted effort by the government to silence websites which are not supporting them.”

The government response follows a well-established pattern, designed to deflect criticism. President Rajapakse “instructed” the country’s police chief

Mahinda Balasuriya to conduct an urgent investigation and Balasuriya, in turn, appointed “a special police team” to carry out inquiries.

Similar “urgent” inquiries have been announced by the president in the past, and special investigative teams established. But in none of these cases has any culprit been detained, let alone charged and convicted. Dasanayaka told the WSWS that he had no faith that it would be any different in the latest arson attack.

Since Rajapakse came to power in late 2005, 14 journalists have been killed and attacks have been carried out on a number of oppositional media outlets. In January 2009, *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge was killed in broad daylight while he was driving his car to work. The attack was carried out near a high-security zone guarded by security forces, but the killers were able to escape on a motorbike without difficulty.

In the same month, an armed gang broke into the private TV and radio station, *Sirasa*, and ransacked and set fire to the premises. Last July, *Siyatha*, another private TV and radio station located in a high-security area in Colombo, was set on fire in the early morning.

Following Monday’s arson attack, Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella issued what has become a standard statement in such cases. He blamed government opponents who were trying to “tarnish the image of the government in the eyes of the people”. As in every other instance, Rambukwella provided no evidence for his assertion.

On Tuesday, more than 150 journalists joined a lunchtime protest in Colombo over the attack organised by the Free Media Movement and the Working Journalists Association.

The French-based Reporters without Borders (RSF) called for “an impartial and independent investigation to be carried out immediately into the circumstances of this attack, which has silenced a news website critical of the government”.

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) Asia-Pacific director, Jacqueline Park, stated: “We are shocked at this incident, which is consistent with a pattern of attempts to intimidate and harass independent media organisations and where those fail, outright attacks on media personnel and premises.”

The attack on the *Lankaenews.com* is another warning to working people that the government will not hesitate to use police state-measures to deal with any political opposition, particularly from workers and youth, to the drastic austerity measures now being implemented.



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