

Sri Lankan defence ministry censors SMS news alerts

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In a further attack on media freedom, the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence and Urban Development last week imposed new restrictions on widely distributed SMS news alert services. Any news related to national security, the security forces and the police must now “get prior approval of the Media Centre for National Security (MCNC)”.

The order, issued on March 12, with immediate effect, also applies to international news agencies. MCNC director general Lakshman Hulugalle, interviewed by Reuters, denied that censorship was intended. “But we want to know what’s going to be disseminated before it is being disseminated,” he added.

The decision is illegal, because it gives the MCNC the power to decide which news alerts on security forces are to be allowed. Under Sri Lankan law, such media restrictions can be imposed only under a formal state of emergency.

Last August, the government withdrew the longstanding emergency regulations in order to deflect criticism over its anti-democratic methods. Many of the draconian powers, however, such as detention without trial, were maintained under other legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

SMS alerts are popular among mobile network users as a cheap, fast way to receive news updates. According to Agence France Presse, Sri Lanka has 18 million mobile subscribers, in a population of 20 million.

The new restrictions followed recent news alerts

involving the army and the police. In one report on March 9 a soldier killed two of his colleagues in a camp at Chavakachcheri on the Jaffna Peninsula. In a second incident a divisional police head was arrested while taking a bribe of 1.2 million rupees (\$US10,000).

On March 10, an SMS alert reported an alleged attempt by army soldiers in a white van to abduct Kolonnawa mayor Ravindra Udayashantha. The white van has become a symbol of the pro-government death squads that have killed or disappeared hundreds of people over the past six years.

Locals grabbed the soldiers and handed them to police but the troops were released later that night. The army acknowledged that the soldiers were on duty in plain clothes but denied any abduction was involved. The mayor rejected the army’s claim.

These incidents are highly embarrassing to the military. Now, under the pretext of “national security”, the defence ministry is seeking to bring SMS news alerts under its control.

This could be a prelude to broader censorship covering the print and electronic media. The Ministry of Mass Media and Information last November demanded that all news web sites publishing articles with “any content relating to Sri Lanka” register with the ministry. The requirement had no legal basis.

Just days earlier, the media ministry blocked access to six web sites critical of the government, including one run by the opposition United National Party. Facing widespread criticism, the government did not enforce media registration, but it continued to bar

access to the six sites.

The *Tamilnet* and *Tamil Canadian* web sites, which are supportive of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have been blocked since June 2007, even though the government has officially denied being responsible.

President Mahinda Rajapakse boasts that his government did not impose media censorship during its renewed war against the LTTE. The security forces, however, took other measures to prevent independent coverage of the war, including a total ban on the media in the war zones during the final months of the war. During this period, according to a UN report, the military killed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.

Pro-government death squads have also been directed against the media. Since Rajapakse's election as president in 2005, 14 journalists and media workers have been killed and at least 25 journalists subjected to physical attack. Others have fled the country, fearing for their lives.

The deaths included the January 2009 murder of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge in broad daylight. Private TV and radio stations such as Sirasa and Siyatha have been subjected to arson attacks. Despite evidence pointing to the involvement of pro-government thugs, the police have failed to find any of the perpetrators.

Attacks on the media have only escalated since the civil war ended in the LTTE's defeat in May 2009. The prevailing climate of intimidation and fear is reflected in the latest global media freedom ranking by Reporters Without Borders: Sri Lanka was rated at 162 out of 178.

The new censorship is being imposed as the country's political and economic crisis deepens. The government has recently introduced a series of austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund that drastically affect the living standards of working people. Sharp fuel price rises provoked major protests by farmers, workers and fishermen.

Rajapakse is clearly fearful that social tensions in Sri Lanka could explode along the lines of the upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia last year. The government is obviously aware that the electronic media played a significant role in the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and is taking a first step toward blocking them.

Above all, the new media restrictions—in violation of the constitution and the legal system—are another warning of the police-state measures that will be used to suppress working class opposition to the government's austerity program.



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