

Wife of missing Sri Lankan journalist speaks to WSWS

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Sandhya Priyangani Ekneligoda, wife of disappeared Sri Lankan journalist and cartoonist Prageeth Ekneligoda, recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about her ongoing struggle to discover what happened to her husband, and the continuing harassment of the Sri Lankan authorities.

Prageeth Ekneligoda disappeared on 24 January 2010, after he went to report on Sri Lankan presidential election meetings. Police investigations have drawn the usual blanks and a *habeas corpus* case, originally filed by Sandhya Ekneligoda in February 2010, is only now being heard at the Colombo Magistrates Court.

Prageeth Ekneligoda supported former Army Commander General Sarath Fonseka, the main bourgeois rival of President Mahinda Rajapakse, during the 2010 presidential election. Fonseka was arbitrarily arrested immediately after the poll and imprisoned on various frame-up charges. Ekneligoda frequently criticised the Rajapakse administration—especially the president and his brothers—over injustice and corruption and is believed to have been disappeared because of these exposures.

Over the past two years, 50-year-old Sandhya Ekneligoda, the mother of two teenage boys, has written to numerous local and international human rights organisations, including the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), seeking their help. She also sent letters to President Rajapakse and other state officials, who have ignored her appeals.

“After the disappearance of my husband,” Ekneligoda told the WSWS, “the government began telling lies in order to divert the sentiment of the masses. Former Attorney General Mohan Peiris told the

UNHRC that Prageeth had sought refuge in a foreign country, so I wrote him a letter asking about my husband’s whereabouts. I never received a reply.”

Ekneligoda explained what happened after she participated in a side event at the recent UNHCR sessions in Geneva. The UNHRC adopted a US-sponsored resolution over Sri Lankan human rights abuses in its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Sri Lankan government bitterly opposed the resolution, despite its very limited character.

Ekneligoda said: “With the help of international human rights organisations I went to Geneva to tell my story to the world. For the understanding of those in attendance, I tried to explain the anti-democratic and repressive environment that is increasingly developing in Sri Lanka. I thought this would help to make people aware of the roots of my husband’s disappearance.

“Speaking about the militarisation of the country, I explained how the military is occupying the north and east. I presented some pictures and described how the families who were displaced during the war are now living in tents, huts and damaged structures, while by contrast there are growing numbers of tourist hotels and war monuments.”

Ekneligoda told the WSWS that she was harassed by several members of the Sri Lankan delegation. UK Sinhala Association president Douglas Wickramaratne attempted to ridicule her, declaring: “How can you see yourself as a victim? You came here in a happy mood.”

Echoing the Rajapakse government, Wickramaratne and several other Sri Lankan delegates accused her, and others participating in the Geneva event, of being “traitors.” Sri Lanka’s state-owned press and television networks published their photographs while media minister Mervin Silva, who is infamous for threatening

journalists, publicly branded several Sri Lankan reporters and human right activists in Geneva as “bastards.”

Silva told a Sri Lankan public meeting that “these people” were “betraying us in Geneva.” He named Sunanda Deshapriya, Nimalka Fernando and Poddala Jayantha, and boasted: “I’m the one who chased [journalist] Poddala Jayantha from Sri Lanka.” The media minister declared that he would not hesitate to “break the limbs” of the named journalists “if they set foot” on the island. Confident that his threats would be endorsed by Rajapakse, Silva said his ministerial position was granted by Rajapakse and “will remain unchanged while he is in power.”

Ekneligoda told the WSWs that Silva’s outburst was an “attempt to provoke the Sinhala racists against us. Our lives are in a grave danger. What’s the wrong I did? The only thing I’ve done is taken the path of democratic rights.”

Explaining the official response to her husband’s disappearance, she said: “On the night my husband failed to return home I went to Homagama police station to report it but they refused to open a case. The police finally accepted my complaint two weeks later.” When she later attempted to get a copy of her complaint, police officers told her they had lost the logbook in which it had been entered. In August 2011, the appeal courts decided to take up her February 2010 *habeas corpus* case and these proceedings are currently underway in the Magistrates Court (MC).

“On March 26, when the case was taken to the MC, I was questioned by the Deputy Solicitor General Shavendra Fernando who represented the state,” Ekneligoda said. “He asked more questions about my visit to Geneva. My counsel pointed out that this had nothing to do with the case, but he kept asking me why I went to Geneva, who sponsored me, how much money I was getting per day, and so on.”

Ekneligoda told the WSWs that even after explaining the purpose of her Geneva visit—to raise concerns about her missing husband—the state counsel accused her of lobbying against the government and the country. “It was a direct violation of my democratic rights,” she added.

Prageeth Ekneligoda’s disappearance is part of broader assault on democratic rights that has intensified under the Rajapakse government. The police-state laws

developed during the civil war remain in place. The denunciation of government opponents as “unpatriotic” takes places as “disappearances” by pro-government death squads continue.

Various Sri Lankan human rights organisations claim that appeals to the US and other international powers can protect basic rights. This is an illusion. The US sponsored the recent UNHRC resolution not to defend democratic rights but as a means for exerting pressure on the Rajapakse government to distance itself from China.

In the past ten years, 17 journalists and other media workers have been killed and around 50 journalists have fled Sri Lanka in fear of their lives.



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