



**SRI
LANKA
CAMPAIGN**
FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

Sri Lanka: An Attack on Press Freedom

Murdered Media Professionals

2004

1. Aiyathurai A. Nadesan –
Journalist / 31 May
2. Kandaswamy Aiyer
Balanadaraj – Writer / 16
August
3. Lanka Jayasundera – Photo
Journalist / 11 December

2005

4. Dharmaratnam Sivaram –
Editor / 28 April
5. Kannamuttu Arsakumar –
Media worker/ 29 June
6. Relangee Selvarajah –
Journalist / 12 August
7. D. Selvaratnam – Media
Worker/ 29 August
8. Yogakumar Krishnapillai –
Media Worker / 30
September
9. L. M. Faleel (Netpittimunai
Faleel) – Writer / 2
December
10. K. Navaratnam – Media
worker / 22 December

2006

11. Subramaniam
Suhirtharajan – Journalist /
24 January
12. S. T. Gananathan – Owner /
1 February

Culture of Impunity

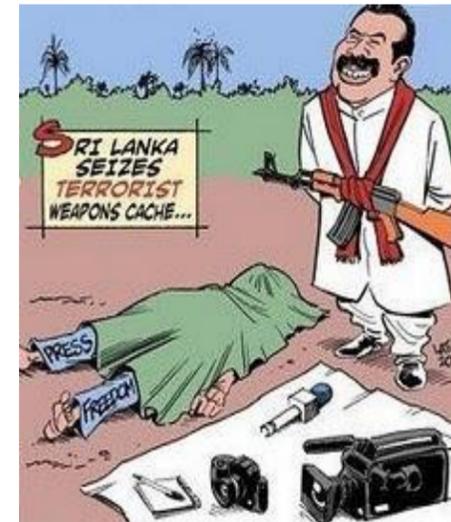
ATTACKS ON MEMBERS OF THE PRESS GO UNPUNISHED

Since 2004, there have been 34 murders of media professionals within Sri Lanka. All 34 murders are unsolved.

Since the inauguration of the current Government of Sri Lanka there has been a pronounced increase in harassment, intimidation, and detention of media professionals. Police have failed to investigate threats to journalists, particularly those who cover elections or expose corruption. To this day, every single murder of a journalist has gone unsolved and unpunished. The effect of such inaction has brought about a culture of impunity for those who wish to harass, attack, or even kill journalists in Sri Lanka.

The Government of Sri Lanka continues to suffocate any news reporting that attempts to accurately reflect the growing nature of corruption and rights abuses. An International Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression Mission to Sri Lanka (2007), consisting of a number of international press freedom organizations (including Reporters Without Borders) reported a *“culture of impunity with no accountability for verbal abuse and physical intimidation against journalists coupled with an increasing and systematic policy of interrogation of journalists with threats of legal action”*.

Anti-terrorism legislation was used to imprison Tamil journalist J.S. Tissainayagam for publishing a critical magazine. Another example of this suffocation of press freedom can be seen in the actions of the Defence Ministry, which has repeatedly published statements on its own website condemning journalists by name or by naming their affiliated group. The Defence Ministry chooses to label the work of critical journalists as ‘traitorous behaviour’, thus serving to legitimise the actions of those looking to intimidate and attack members of the press.



Freedom of expression is a core human right

This climate of fear not only affects the rights of journalists. The Sri Lankan people are deprived of their right to information as journalists are forced to practice an unprecedented level of self-censorship.

This climate of fear resonates throughout the North and the East of the country, where daily life is policed and scrutinized by a heavy



and imposing military presence. It remains almost impossible for journalists to work in the public domain. The local population are too afraid to speak to journalists; and

journalists are likewise afraid of reprisals from the security forces. No formal mechanism for witness protection exists for those wishing to tell the truth about crimes committed during the final stages of the conflict. The former warzone still remains almost impenetrable to independent journalism – stifling any efforts to report on the true nature of the conflict and the issues facing those currently subjected to tight military controls.

Lasantha Wickramatunga

Editor of the Sunday Leader and prominent government critic. Assassinated in broad daylight in a high-security zone regularly patrolled by the army – 8 January 2009.

Mylvaganam Nimalarajan

BBC journalist. Shot dead by gunmen through the window of his study despite being within a Sri Lanka Army high security zone in Jaffna – October 19, 2000.

Paranirupasingham Devakumar

Jaffna correspondent for News 1 and one of the last remaining journalists left in the Jaffna peninsula. His criticism of both the LTTE and the Government made him unpopular on both sides. His death in a knife attack can be put down to both sides' desire to create a war without witnesses. His death was blamed on the LTTE but reliable sources have informed our campaign that Devakumar was killed by EPDP paramilitary under the instruction of military intelligence attached to the Jaffna base – 28 May, 2008.

13. Bastian George Sagayathas – Media worker / 3 May
 14. Rajaratnam Ranjith Kumar – Media worker / 3 May
 15. Sampath Lakmal de Silva – Journalist / 2 July
 16. Mariadasan Manojanraj – Media worker / 1 August
 17. Pathmanathan Vismananthan – Singer and musician / 2 August
 18. Sathasivam Baskaran – Media worker / 15 August
 19. Sinnathamby Sivamaharajah – Media owner / 20 August
- 2007**
20. S. Raveendran – Media worker / 12 February
 21. Subramaniam Ramachandran – Media personnel / 15 February
 22. Chandrabose Suthakar – Journalist / 16 April
 23. Selvarasah Rajeevarman – Journalist / 29 April

LASANTHA WICKRAMATUNGA

The Sunday Leader editor Lasantha Wickramatunga was shot dead by gunmen on motorcycles as he drove to work in a high security zone of the city suburbs of Colombo. Wickramatunga was a high profile critic of the government and was subject to a number of libel cases



brought against him. Reporters Without Borders released a statement shortly after his assassination, holding the government directly responsible; “because they incited hatred against him and allowed an outrageous level of impunity to develop as regards to violence against the press.”. The Government’s

vilification of journalists such as Wickramatunga, has created an atmosphere that has legitimized and inspired attacks against media professionals. Wickramatunga’s assassination remains unsolved and, like the 33 other unsolved murders, are all evidence of the state created culture of impunity that should provide an indictment of the Government of Sri Lanka’s iron grip on press freedoms.

PRAGEETH EKNELIGODA

Sri Lankan journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda has been missing for over a year and a half. Prageeth was abducted on 24 January 2010 and has not been heard from since. Ekneligoda was an outspoken supporter of Gen. Sarath Fonseka, who ran for the opposition against the government in the 2010 elections. There is still no news of his whereabouts or fate and his abductors are still at large. There has been a distinct lack of a thorough and credible investigation into Prageeth’s disappearance. His wife Sandhya has received almost no response to her repeated requests for information about her husband’s fate.

Ekneligoda is mentioned in a United Nations Committee on Missing Persons report. The very fact that his case is known to the United Nations would, in most cases around the world, mean that a high profile investigation would take place.

“No other profession calls on its practitioners to lay down their lives for their art save the armed forces - and, in Sri Lanka, journalism. In the course of the last few years, the independent media have increasingly come under attack. Electronic and print institutions have been burned, bombed, sealed and coerced. Countless journalists have been harassed, threatened and killed. It has been my honour to belong to all those categories, and now especially the last.” **Lasantha Wickramatunga**, in an article published 3 days after his death.



This is, unfortunately, not the case in Sri Lanka; where the Government continues to ignore the calls for investigations into any of the increasing number of journalist disappearances and murders.

The reluctance of the Government of Sri Lanka to carry out an investigation into a case such as Ekneligoda’s, raises suspicion as to whether this is part of a strategy to cover up their own involvement.

Attacks on Wickramatunga & Sunday Leader

- **7th Feb 1995**
Lasantha and his wife were badly beaten by thugs on their way home.
- **17th June 1998**
Lasantha’s house came under grenade attack
- **16th Oct 2005**
Sunday Leader printing press set on fire.
- **11TH Jan 2006**
Rajapaksa made an abusive phone call to Wickramatunga – “I treated you well all this while. Now I will destroy you. You don’t know who Mahinda Rajapakse is. You watch what I will do to you!”
- **November 2008**
Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksha obtains an injunction stopping the Sunday Leader newspaper from writing anything critical of him.
- **28 December 2008**
Journalists’ protests prevents the Government from arresting Lasantha on a false charge.
- **8 January 2009**
Lasantha Wickrematunga is shot dead by unknown gunmen.

24. Sahadevan Neelakshan –
Journalist / 1 August

25. Anthonypillai Sherin
Siththiranjana – Media
worker / 5 November

26. Vadivel Nimalarajah –
Media worker / 17
November

27. Isaivizhi Chempian
(Subhajini) - Media
worker / 27 November

28. Suresh Limbiyo – Media
Worker / 27 November

29. T.Tharmalingam – Media
Worker / 27 November

2008

30. Paranirupesingham
Devakumar – Journalist /
28 May

31. Rasmi Mohamad –
Journalist / 6 October

2009

32. Lasantha Wickrematunga -
Editor / 8 January

33. Punniyamurthy
Sathyamurthy – Journalist
/ 12 February

34. Sasi Mathan – Media
worker / 6 March

Self-Censorship

A MASS EXODUS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

Due to a culture of impunity, the psyche of the media in Sri Lanka is very much one of 'self-censorship'. A climate of fear exists amongst Sri Lanka's media community, a fear of intimidation, violence, arrest and forced disappearance. The Government of Sri Lanka's attitude towards press freedom (what UNESCO calls a fundamental condition for democracy) is one of aggression and intimidation.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) observe that media professionals who criticise the Government of Sri Lanka are subject to reprisals.



RSF point out that the online newspaper *Lanka eNews* and its journalists had been threatened and attacked for more than a year until an arson attack destroyed its premises on 30 January 2011. State media employees have been threatened, suspended or even fired for protesting against government control of their work. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa stated publicly that he regretted the abolition of prison sentences for press offences and went on to pressure for the restoration of the Press Council – which has the power to impose jail sentences on journalists (RSF, 2011).

“The freedom to speak and the freedom to write are essential preconditions for the transition towards democracy and good governance” – Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO.

Journalists within Sri Lanka have been scared into 'self-censorship', refraining from investigative journalism and critical commentary. Journalists who do speak out are often aggressively attacked in the nationalist media and portrayed as treacherous and disloyal.

Poddala Jayantha, the secretary of Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association, is one of many Sri Lankan journalists who have found themselves living in exile after criticising the Government of Sri Lanka. Jayantha fell victim to a 'white van abduction' (notorious in Sri Lanka); he was abducted by a gang who beat him severely and dropped him by the roadside. Many of those who fall victim to a 'white van abduction' are never seen again. Jayantha's ordeal left him in fear for his life and forced him into exile in the USA.

By 2009, a staggering 62 journalists had left Sri Lanka (25 in 2009 alone). This 'mass exodus' of journalists tells the world all they need to know about press freedom in Sri Lanka. Journalists wishing to cover topics such as governance, violence, corruption and/or conflict issues are, according to a UNESCO report, a positive influence. UNESCO argues that such journalism serves as a mechanism to hold governments accountable for their actions. The UNESCO report goes on to state that *“freedom of expression is essential to the exercise of all other rights. Without it, people cannot be aware of their rights and, less still, secure respect for them.”*

Who is Responsible?

- **State & Paramilitary Personnel**
Many of whom are linked to the EPDP and TMVP political parties, who murder and intimidate journalists
- **The Sri Lankan Army**
The SLA's approach to the media legitimises the actions of those looking to intimidate and attack members of the press.
- **The Government of Sri Lanka**
The GoSL allows a culture of impunity to exist and use the legal system as a tool for intimidation.
- **Nationalist Media**
Prevent open political debate and attack those who challenge the government's narrative.
- **The LTTE**
Are responsible for many of the murders of journalists covering the war.

“Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated. Freedom of information implies the right to gather, transmit and publish news anywhere and everywhere without fetters. As such it is an essential factor in any serious effort to promote the peace and progress of the world”
General Assembly of the United Nations in 1946.

The Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Sri Lanka as top of the list of countries for journalist exiles. Sri Lanka is now ranked the 4th most dangerous country for journalists. Russia, Colombia, Mexico and Afghanistan are considered less dangerous. At least 34 media workers have been unlawfully killed since 2004, and many more have been detained, tortured or disappeared and not one person has been charged or found guilty so far. NGO workers and other human rights defenders – local and international – have also been threatened or harassed.

The Government of Sri Lanka’s attitude towards the media was heavily criticized by a UN Panel of Experts set up to advise the Secretary General on wartime accountability in Sri Lanka. The panel stated in its 2011 report that *“the Government sought to intimidate and silence the media and other critics of the war through a variety of threats and actions, including the use of white vans to abduct and to make people disappear.”*

We call for:

- **The protection of fundamental human rights and freedom of expression for all Sri Lankans, including media workers and human rights defenders.**
- **Judicial independence and restoration of the rule of law.**
- **An end to the culture of impunity via competent and thorough investigations into the murders and disappearances of all media professionals.**
- **The implementation of a Freedom of Information Bill that complies with international and regional best practice.**



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