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Attacks on the Press 2010 - Sri Lanka

Top Developments

- Anti-government cartoonist missing; police make no evident effort to find him.
- Government readies plan for a strict media regulatory agency.

Key Statistic

- **19:** Journalists in exile, having fled violence, imprisonment, and intimidation.

In his Independence Day speech on February 4, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared that the country "cannot be developed with harassment, gross punishments, or by the gun." But the sentence that followed – "Discipline is not revenge" – hinted at the repressive measures his administration would continue to pursue against critical news media.

The January 26 presidential elections that returned Rajapaksa to office with a resounding majority were followed in April by parliamentary elections that left his United People's Freedom Alliance with 144 of 225 seats. The party was then able to build a coalition giving Rajapaksa the two-thirds majority he needed to rewrite the constitution. And so he did. On September 8, parliament passed a constitutional amendment striking down the two-term limit on the presidency. With the amendment, Rajapaksa could retain power indefinitely.

Despite its electoral mandate and the nation's first full year of peace after decades of civil strife, the Rajapaksa administration chose not to relax its anti-media policies. In a May special report, CPJ found the government was continuing to repress the news media, and that individual journalists still faced violence, harassment, and detention. The government continued on that path in July, when it announced plans to launch a Media Development Authority (MDA) modeled after Singapore's strict media agency. Several commentators in Sri Lanka noted that Sri Lanka's MDA proposal repeated the Singaporean measure almost word for word.

Attacks on journalists continued to go uninvestigated. The mysterious disappearance of anti-Rajapaksa cartoonist and columnist Prageeth Eknelygoda in January set a tone of intimidation for the rest of the year. His wife, Sandhya, told CPJ that she was unable to persuade police to investigate or the Human Rights Court to act on her lawsuit seeking action. Staff at *Lanka eNews*, the news website where Eknelygoda worked, faced intimidation and threats; in March, Editor Sandaruwan Senadheera fled into exile in England.

Sri Lanka ranked fourth on CPJ's 2010 Impunity Index, a ranking of countries where journalists are regularly murdered and governments fail to solve the crimes. Only Iraq, Somalia, and the Philippines had worse records. Ten Sri Lankan journalists have been murdered over the past decade for their coverage of civil war, human rights, politics, military affairs, and corruption, but not a single conviction has been obtained. Most of those killings have come during Rajapaksa's time as prime minister and president, CPJ research showed.

No case was more emblematic than the unsolved slaying of the popular editor and columnist Lasantha Wickramatunga, who was beaten to death by eight assailants on a busy suburban Colombo street on a weekday morning in January 2009. The government staged investigative hearings without making evident progress in identifying the culprits. No progress was reported in another January 2009 attack, a bombing at the studios of Sirasa TV, the country's largest independent news broadcaster.

Government investigators did devote time and attention to harassing critical journalists. In early 2010, the Criminal Investigation Division detained Chandana Sirimalwatte, chief editor of the Marxist weekly *Lanka*, for about two weeks. The BBC, citing the division director, said the journalist was being held under emergency anti-terror regulations. Interrogators told Sirimalwatte that he had been detained on orders from Secretary of Defense Gothabaya Rajapaksa, the president's brother. Sirimalwatte was eventually released without charge.

One positive note was hit during the year: On June 10, *OutreachSL* editor J.S. Tissainayagam arrived at Washington's Dulles International Airport, ending a two-year-long ordeal of incarceration and prosecution. The Tamil editor had been jailed in March 2008 on terrorism charges that CPJ concluded were in retaliation for his critical reporting on human rights issues. Released on bail in January, Tissainayagam was granted a presidential pardon on May 3, World Press Freedom Day. CPJ research shows that at least 19 Sri Lankan journalists were in exile.

In a meeting with CPJ, Attorney General Mohan Peiris said he was prepared to offer protection to any journalist who returned from exile. "Speaking for myself – and I'm fairly sure the government will back me up on this – there is no question that the government needs our journalists," he told CPJ in his office. "They must come back and work with us and help set up the structures so that we can work together and we can respect each other. We must work with these institutions because we need them. We know if they stay outside and attack the government, that is not useful." When asked if the government would ensure their safety, Peiris said, "Of course, if they come back, there must be assurance on our part that they won't come to any harm."

There were few takers. Lasantha Wickramatunga's wife, Sonali, now in exile in the United States, said in an e-mail message to CPJ that administration officials "cheered on the sidelines as this government rode roughshod over the human rights of thousands and killed journalists."

Another case reflected the ongoing burden of operating independent media in Sri Lanka: On July 30, an arson attack on the offices of the Voice of Asia Network in the heart of Colombo injured two staff members. The fire destroyed the studios of the group's Siyatha TV station, although its three radio stations were able to remain on the air. Though the stations were better known for entertainment than news, the owners had supported opposition candidate Sarath Fonseka in the presidential elections.

With the civil conflict over, some of the international community began to distance itself from Rajapaksa's heavy-handed governance. Several embassies closed operations in Colombo, some because of cost-cutting. The European Union fell flat in its effort to bring about a change in the government's human rights policies by withdrawing a preferential tariff agreement known as GSP+; the Sri Lankan government rejected the EU's demands and pressed ahead without the important trade relationship. Sri Lanka turned increasingly to China, Iran, and Pakistan for aid, financial assistance, trade, and infrastructure investment.

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