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SILENCING DISSENT

**MEDIA WORKERS
UNDER ATTACK
IN SRI LANKA**

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



‘In the wake of my death I know you will make all the usual sanctimonious noises and call upon the police to hold a swift and thorough inquiry. But like all the inquiries you have ordered in the past, nothing will come of this one, too.’

Lasantha Wickrematunge in an obituary he wrote predicting his own death, *Sunday Leader*, published 11 January 2009

In Sri Lanka, reporting the truth can be fatal. Journalists have been killed, physically assaulted, abducted, and harassed by both government personnel and members of armed groups. At least 15 journalists have been killed since 2006 and more than 20 have fled the country. The perpetrators of such human rights violations have never been brought to justice.

These attacks take place against a backdrop of official government statements accusing dissenting journalists or human rights activists of treason or supporting the armed group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The government’s frequent vitriolic responses to any criticism only serve to erode its legitimacy in the international arena. But in Sri Lanka, such rhetoric serves to implicitly support, if not actually encourage, physical attacks on government critics.

LASANTHA WICKREMATUNGE



Lasantha Wickrematunge, outspoken critic of the Sri Lankan government and editor of the *Sunday Leader* newspaper, was shot and killed on his way to work on 8 January 2009. He died a few hours later of his injuries. The *Sunday Leader* newspaper is known in Sri Lanka for its articles exposing political corruption in privatization deals and for drawing attention to human rights abuses in connection with the war between the government and the LTTE.

Shortly before he was killed, Lasantha Wickrematunge wrote an obituary predicting his own death. “People often ask me why I take such risks and tell me it is a matter of time before I am bumped off,” he wrote. “Of course I know that: it is inevitable. But if we do not speak out now, there will be no one left to speak for those who cannot”.



PRESS CENSORSHIP IN WARTIME

The conflict between the government and the LTTE, which ran from July 1983 to May 2009, had a corrosive effect on press freedom in Sri Lanka. From the outset, says Sri Lankan journalist and human rights activist Sunanda Deshapriya, the government refused to recognize that journalists and media workers (or the public for that matter) had a right to information. Pressure on Sri Lanka's journalists escalated as fighting intensified, and during the last phase of the war – from 2006 onward – the government tightened



restrictions, not even allowing journalists to report casualty figures.

"If you read Sri Lankan newspapers, you still get the government version," said Sunanda Deshapriya. "Very rarely, you get a critical point of view."

'Everyone is censoring themselves... some of them willingly because [they] really support the system – and some of them unwillingly. In Sri Lanka, there is no freedom of press.'

Sunanda Deshapriya, journalist

POST-ELECTION CLAMPDOWN

Since the presidential election concluded on 26 January 2010, the government has exerted a powerful stranglehold over its critics, especially opposition supporters and journalists. The clampdown on dissent is acute and has included arrests, death threats against several prominent newspaper editors, harassment of trade unionists and state employees who supported the opposition, along with intimidation of independent web-based media.

PRAGEETH EKNALIGODA

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On 24 January, journalist and political analyst Prageeth Eknaligoda went missing from Homagama, near the capital Colombo. He disappeared shortly after leaving work at the Lanka-e-News office on 24 January. Local residents told Sri Lankan press they saw a white van without number plates close to his house at around this time. The last contact with him was at 9.30pm that day and since then his phone has not functioned and his friends and family have not heard from him. In the days leading up to his disappearance, he had told a close friend that he believed he was being followed.

When his wife reported his disappearance to the Homagama police, she was herself detained for several hours. Prageeth Eknaligoda had been

actively reporting on political events leading up to the 26 January presidential election, including threats to opposition activists.

This is not the first time Prageeth Eknaligoda has disappeared. On 27 August 2009 he was abducted by a group who arrived in a white van. He was bundled into the van, blindfolded, handcuffed and taken to an unknown destination before being released the following day. White vans have been used in many abductions and enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka, particularly since 2006, when state agents and paramilitary groups which are allied to the government stepped up attacks on critics of the government.

JUSTICE NOW

Amnesty International calls on the government of Sri Lanka to take immediate steps to end repression of journalists and political opponents. To date, Amnesty International is unaware of any investigation that has led to those believed responsible for human rights violations against journalists and other media workers being brought to justice. These include killings dating back to 1990. Those who target and even kill journalists have enjoyed impunity for years.

Cover: Protesters hold a silent vigil condemning the killing of Sunday Leader newspaper editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 15 January 2009.

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Previous page: Activists for free media demonstrate following a grenade attack on a Sri Lankan television station that same day, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 6 January 2009.

TAKE ACTION

Please write to the President of Sri Lanka, calling on him to:

- End the harassment, intimidation, excessive restrictions and attacks on the media.
- Urgently ensure that all human rights violations against journalists are independently, impartially and effectively investigated, and that those responsible for them are brought to justice.
- Demonstrate the government's commitment to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression, assembly and association by inviting the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression without further delay.

Please send your appeals to:

President Mahinda Rajapaksa
Presidential Secretariat
Colombo 1
Sri Lanka
Salutation: Dear Honourable President Rajapaksa

STOP VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN
AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.8 million supporters, members and activists in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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