



The Associated Press

12/4/2007

## Sri Lanka government uses special powers to persecute journalists, rights group says

**COLOMBO, Sri Lanka:** Sri Lanka's government is abusing anti-terror legislation to target journalists who write on human rights abuses or question the administration's handling of the conflict with separatist rebels, an international watchdog said Thursday.

Standard Newspapers Ltd. was forced to close March 29 after the government froze its assets citing links with Tamil Tiger insurgents, Human Rights Watch said.

The move follows the arrest of the paper's financial director, Dushantha Basnayake, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act in February. Basnayake has remained in detention without charge since then, the group said.

Standard Newspapers used to publish the Sinhalese-language weekly Mawbima and the English-language Sunday Standard.

Sri Lanka reinvoked the strict counterterrorism law last December after suspected rebels launched a failed suicide attack on the country's defense secretary. The law grants security forces sweeping powers to hold anyone without a warrant for up to 12 months without charge, raid any home and even demolish properties considered a threat to national security.

The government is using anti-terrorism legislation to silence the press," said Sam Zarifi, Asia research director for Human Rights Watch. "As the war heats up, the government is clamping down on criticism and dissent."

Mawbima reporter Munusamy Parameswary was arrested in November under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and accused of giving shelter to an alleged female Tamil rebel. The Supreme Court, however, found no reasonable grounds for her detention and ordered her release on March 22.

"The government's moves against Mawbima are a disturbing blow to press freedom in Sri Lanka," Zarifi said. "Increasingly, critics of government policy are being treated as traitors and enemies of the state."

The Mawbima frequently reported on the disappearances of Sri Lankans, allegedly abducted by government forces or Tamil rebels.

No comment was immediately available from the government, which generally denies charges of rights violations.

Press freedom and journalists are also being squeezed by the other parties in Sri Lanka's decades-old civil conflict, HRW said.

"In the areas under its control, the LTTE does not allow a free press. In other areas it has intimidated, attacked and sometimes killed journalists critical of their policies or actions," the group said, referring to the Tigers by their official name — the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

A rebel breakaway faction, known as the Karuna group, which split from the LTTE in 2004 has "blocked the sale of the Tamil-language dailies Virakesari, Thinakkural and Sudar Oli, which are critical of the armed group," the watchdog said.

The rebels have been fighting since 1983 for a separate homeland for Sri Lanka's 3.1 million Tamils, a largely Hindu ethnic group. The Tamils have faced decades of discrimination from the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese, who make up a majority of the nation's 19 million people.

At least 65,000 people were killed before a 2002 cease-fire which officially remains in force but has completely unraveled over the last 18 months as tit-for-tat attacks have grown into all-out war. Another 4,000 people, many of them civilians, are estimated to have been killed since late 2005.