

Alleged move to arrest Editor

By Gihan de Chickera

Concerns that prevailing anti-terrorism laws could be used to suppress the media heightened yesterday amidst reports of alleged Government moves to arrest The Sunday Leader Editor Lasantha Wickramatunga over the contents of a lead story in his newspaper last Sunday.

Mr. Wickramatunga yesterday charged that the Defence Ministry had ordered the CID to arrest him under recently introduced anti-terrorism laws, for the lead story headlined 'President to get Rs. 400 million luxury bunker' in the Christmas Eve issue of The Sunday Leader. The arrest was to be made on national security concerns.

He said the CID had consulted the Attorney General on the legality of such an arrest to which the AG had responded in the negative.

"The Attorney General reportedly told the CID it was completely illegal to arrest me under such charges as I had not violated the law and the regulations did not apply to such situations," he told journalists who had gathered at The Sunday Leader office in Ward Place.

Mr. Wickramatunga charged that despite this, the Defence Ministry had ordered the CID to bypass the AG's ruling and arrest him. He said to the best of his knowledge the Defence Ministry order was not a written one but a verbal notification.

Mr. Wickramatunga also made special reference to an article carried in the front page of the State run Daily News yesterday. The report headlined 'Talking point: Sleeping with the enemy' which asked why the AG was not taking action against The Sunday Leader for allegedly causing dissension among security forces.

"I will face this crisis. I am not going to seek refuge in hospital. I will not go abroad or go into hiding. I am ready to face this head-on and live up to The Sunday Leader motto of 'unbowed and unafraid' ", he said.

The Editor said he was being persecuted because his paper regularly exposed Government corruption and the abuse of State power. He charged that the motivation of the anti-terrorism laws was not to combat terrorism but to suppress media freedom and the South.

"This is a signal to the South that the country is going back to the terror era. As far as I know no terrorist has been arrested under these laws", he said.

"I am not surprised this is happening", he added, joking that never before has he received so much media attention.

"If arrested I will file a fundamental rights petition in the Supreme Court" he added.



Mr. Wickramatunga is surrounded by colleagues and friends at his office as news spread that the CID was about to arrest him. Pic. by Dinuka Liyanawatte

Commenting on the story which sparked the controversy, Mr. Wickramatunga said he had followed Government directives to clarify all security related stories from either the Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Government media spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella or the Media Centre for National Security Director Lakshman Hulugalle.

Accordingly Mr. Wickramatunga had reportedly called Mr. Hulugalle to clarify the presidential bunker story. Although Mr. Hulugalle denied any knowledge of the bunker, he had assured The Sunday Leader Editor that no action would be taken against the newspaper if such a story was reported.

"He categorically said no action would be taken against us and we quoted him in the article", Mr. Wickramatunga said.

However he charged that the CID later informed him of the arrest.

"I called Mr. Hulugalle who said he knew nothing about moves to arrest me. He said he would get back to me regarding the matter, but never did" he said.

Mr. Wickramatunga's lawyer, former National Police Commission head Ranjith Abeyesuriya told the Daily Mirror that the new anti-terrorism regulations allowed the Defence Secretary or a police DIG to issue detention orders for an arrest. However Mr. Abeyesuriya said the reasons for such an arrest would have to be justified before the Supreme Court.

Lasantha Wickramatunga's brother Lal Wickramatunga, who is also Chairman of Leader Publications, alleged that the order to arrest his brother came directly from Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. He said the CID had called at about 3 in the afternoon yesterday to say the arrest would be made at 5 in the evening. However he refused to disclose the identity of the CID officers saying that doing so would result in them losing their jobs.

Amidst the chaos in his office, Mr. Wickramatunga received a multitude of phone calls last evening from international news services, fellow newspaper editors, media activists and diplomats.

Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI) Director General Ranga Kalansooriya said Editors, journalists and media activists met three days after the new laws came into effect, to study whether they could be used to suppress the media.

He said they wrote to Media Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa calling for a meeting to clarify the matter, but two weeks had passed with no word from the minister.

"We have not received any clear guarantee from the Government that the regulations would not be used against the media. There have not been any deliberations between the Government and the media on the matter", he said adding that the SLPI's intention was to include journalists into section 19 of the regulations, which identify parties against whom the legislation cannot be used.

"Whether it is The Sunday Leader or the Sunday Observer these regulations become an impediment to the media", he said adding that three journalists working for the State press had already been questioned by the CID, and now the private media were being threatened.