

Sri Lanka journalists harassed: media group

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COLOMBO (AFP) — Journalists covering Sri Lanka's war with Tamil Tiger rebels are being harassed despite a government pledge to take action to protect the press, a rights group said Friday.

The Free Media Movement (FMM) reported eight incidents of threats and intimidation, just two weeks after a ministerial committee was formed to look at the issue of media rights.

The incidents included verbal death threats, assaults in public places and visits to journalists' homes by people claiming to be from the police, the statement said.

"It is apparent that the cabinet sub-committee... is powerless to foster media freedom and the freedom of expression in Sri Lanka, or investigate meaningfully the violence directed at journalists," the FMM said.

The rights group demanded a probe into the recent incidents and asked the committee to tell police to respect journalists.

In June, Sri Lanka's hawkish defence ministry published several editorials which labelled journalists and reporters "cowboy defence analysts" and "enemies of the state."

The defence ministry presented reporters with a stark choice of being either pro-government or "pro-terrorist" -- sparking renewed alarm among media rights activists about freedom of the press in Sri Lanka.

Since August 2005, 12 media workers have been killed in Sri Lanka, which is regarded as the second-most dangerous place for journalists after Iraq.

Eleven of them died in government-controlled areas and no one has been brought to justice in connection with the deaths.

Sri Lanka's bitter ethnic war, which has left thousands of people dead, has escalated sharply since January, when the government pulled out of a Norwegian-brokered truce with the Tamil Tigers.