

TAMIL JOURNALIST SENTENCED TO 20 YEARS OF HARD LABOUR

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Popular Tamil journalist **J.S. Tissainayagam** has been sentenced to 20 years hard labour on charges of supporting terrorism and inciting racial hatred, becoming the first journalist to be convicted under Sri Lanka's draconian anti-terrorism law.

An English-language columnist for the Sri Lankan "Sunday Times" and editor of the news website OutreachSL, Tissainayagam was arrested on 7 March 2008.

He spent five months in prison without charge before his indictment in August 2008 for promoting terrorism through the magazine "Northeastern Monthly", which he briefly published in 2006. The magazine criticised the government's role in the war against the Tamil Tiger rebels and accused authorities of withholding food and other essential items from Tamil-majority areas.

On 31 August, a High Court judge ruled that Tissainayagam's articles violated the law because they were aimed at creating "communal disharmony."

The court also found that he had received money from the LTTE to fund his website, but RSF has established that the site was funded by a German aid project.

"The imposition of this extremely severe sentence on Tissainayagam suggests that some Sri Lanka judges confuse justice with revenge," RSF said. "With the help of confessions extracted by force and information that was false or distorted, the court has used an anti-terrorism law that was intended for terrorists, not for journalists and human rights activists."

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which has been campaigning tirelessly for his release, Tissainayagam was repeatedly tortured and denied medical treatment while in prison.

Despite the end of the war, the Sri Lankan state continues to attack journalists who do not support its policies.

According to the International Press Institute (IPI), 12 journalists have been killed in Sri Lanka since 2006, and many others have been harassed, threatened and arrested. RSF has reported that Sri Lanka is one of the worst-hit countries in the world when it comes to the kidnap, arrest and disappearance of journalists.

CPJ announced that it will honour Tissainayagam with a 2009 International Press Freedom Award. Meanwhile, the Globe Media Forum and RSF report that Tissainayagam will be the first winner of the Peter Mackler Prize, "a newly created award for journalists who display great courage and professional integrity in countries where press freedom is not respected."