

# State Security Forces bar media access in Sri Lanka

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The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has condemned the censorship of photographers and journalists by security forces in Sri Lanka.

The Free Media Movement (FMM), an IFJ affiliate in Colombo, has reported that on recent occasions military forces prevented the media from covering incidents in the public interest.

On October 12 security officials forced journalists to leave the scene of a protest outside the United Nations (UN) office in Jaffna in Sri Lanka's north, where protesters had gathered to meet UN Human Rights Commissioner Louise Arbor. Security officials grabbed the cameras of Yal Thinakkural and journalist Sellaiyah Ruban, and deleted all photos of the incident.

Again on October 17 security forces prevented photojournalists from taking photographs of a military truck transporting munitions, which had met with an accident in Kosswatta, a suburb of Colombo. Photographs taken by Berti Mendis from *The Sunday Times* were destroyed when his camera was taken by security officials, and its film exposed. The use of mobile phones was also

banned at the scene.

IFJ Asia-Pacific Director Jacqueline Park said the actions of security forces were deliberate attacks on freedom of speech.

"It is disturbing to think that security officials can control what is reported to the public," she said. "In such a climate of censorship and intimidation, journalists cannot do their jobs and keep the public informed."

"The actions of the military seriously call into question the current state of media freedom in Sri Lanka."

The IFJ feels that there was no justification for censoring the media in either of these cases, and that barring media access stifles democratic debate and instead fosters an ill-informed citizenry.

The IFJ joins its affiliate FMM in calling for the Sri Lankan government to support free and open reporting.