

DIFFICULTIES IN PROVINCIAL REPORTING IMPEDE

PRESS FREEDOM IN SRI LANKA

Press freedom in Sri Lanka is seriously impeded by myriad obstacles to serious and independent news reporting in the country's provinces, according to a fact-finding report issued by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the International Press Institute on November 12, 2007.

The report highlights the great difficulties faced by media workers reporting from Sri Lanka's provinces, particularly in terms of unsafe and poor working conditions and weak job security, restrictions on reporters' movements within and between provinces, limited access to officials and information, extreme ethnic prejudice and partisan tensions, and the metropolitan media's apparent disinterest in reports from outside the capital.

The press freedom report is the result of a fact-finding mission by representatives the IFJ, the International Press Institute and the Sri Lankan Free Media Movement, to Sri Lanka's eastern province in June 2007.

This follows the release of a report "Jaffna's media in the grip of terror" which highlighted the extreme dangers for journalists working there. A further report on the national media in Colombo will be released shortly. Media workers who met with the fact-finding team were especially disturbed that Sri Lanka's wider national public is being kept in the dark about potentially explosive issues in the provinces.

In particular, local journalists said their attempts to report on shortfalls in the Government's program for reconstruction and resettlement of internally displaced people in the region, especially displaced Muslim communities, were impeded by official restrictions and insufficient national attention.

Without media coverage that could prompt action to address such shortfalls, the reporters feared further inter-cultural conflict could erupt. The report recommends that editors of media outlets in Colombo visit the country's provinces to better inform themselves on regional issues, including the working conditions and personal safety of provincial journalists.

Greater coverage of provincial issues is needed within the national media, the report advises, while local media personnel must be granted greater job security and personal protection. All government authorities should be advised to recognise formal media credentials without reference to an individual's ethnicity or political leanings, the report says. Restrictions on media personnel's movements and reporting must be eased to ensure the wider public has the opportunity to access information regarding the true situation in the provinces.

In addition, local media workers require more safety training and recognition of their efforts. The mission to the Eastern Province was undertaken as a part of the broader International Press Freedom Mission to Sri Lanka in June which included representatives from Reporters Sans Frontieres, the South Asian Free Media Association and International Media Support.

The Mission was supported in Sri Lanka by the Free Media Movement, the Working Journalists' Association, the Tamil Media Alliance, the Muslim Media Forum, the Federation of Media Employees Trade Union, and the Sri Lanka Press Institute.