

Government ministers assail independant media and defence reporter, while foreign TV crew is prevented from working in Jaffna

Senior officials have threatened independent news media and investigative journalist Iqbal Athas in recent weeks, and the government is reportedly planning to increase restrictions on coverage of the security situation as fighting rages in the north, Reporters Without Borders said today. A foreign TV crew was prevented from working in the northern city of Jaffna at the end of last week.

"Although UN human rights high commissioner Louise Arbour is due to begin a visit to Sri Lanka in a few days, the government is seriously jeopardising the safety of certain journalists and is preventing the press from operating in areas hit by the fighting," the organisation said. "We urge President Mahinda Rajapaksa to appeal for calm and to take no measures that violate press freedom."

The latest incident was the expulsion of three women journalists working for the British TV production company Quick Silver Media from Jaffna on 5 October. Reporter Sandra Jordan, camerawoman Siobhan Sinnerton and local producer Dushiyanthini Kanagasabapathipillai arrived in the city on 4 October and went to a hotel. But soldiers arrived and forced them to spend the night in a military base in nearby Palaly. They next day, the soldiers took them on a two-hour tour of the city and then told them to take a flight back to Colombo. As a result, they were prevented from working.

Athas, who writes about defence affairs for The Sunday Times, was accused of being a "traitor" and of helping the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam rebels in an article posted on the defence ministry website and published in a government newspaper on 2 October. The attack came just a few weeks after Athas resumed working following a period spent in self-imposed exile, without doing any writing, because of death threats.

Headlined "Mr. Iqbal Athas, stop insulting our soldiers' sacrifices," the defence ministry article suggested that he was "assisting in the psychological operations of the LTTE terrorists." Three days earlier, military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakakara accused Athas of "supporting terrorism" in his articles and urged the media to stop publishing them. All the media have reported the accusation being made against Athas, who told Reporters Without Borders he was very worried about this new campaign of intimidation.

The Free Media Movement (FMM), a Sri Lankan NGO, meanwhile reported at the end of last month that the government was planning to use new emergency measures to step up its control of the media's reporting on the fighting, and would use the need to protect national security as its justification for the new restrictions. The FMM challenged the government to confirm or deny whether it was indeed planning to do this.

Government ministers have attacked the privately-owned media in speeches. Transport minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle accused the management of privately-owned Sirasa TV of links with the head of the Tamil Tigers on 22 September, pointing out that the station had not provided direct coverage of a ceremony marking a recent navy defeat of LTTE sea-borne forces.

A few days before that, labour minister Mervin Silva attacked the privately-owned media, accusing Sirasa TV and the Daily Mirror newspaper of defamation in their coverage of his son's arrest. At the same time, the minister's thugs prevented a Sirasa TV crew from attending an event at which he was present. Sirasa TV and the Daily Mirror had accused Silva of intimidating the judge in charge of his son's case. The claim has not been denied by the judge, and judicial officials have also accused Silva of intimidation.