

CONFLICT FUELS INFORMATION CLAMPDOWN

In Sri Lanka's Jaffna Peninsula, where fighting between government forces and the rebel Tamil Tigers has resumed since the collapse of a ceasefire in April 2006, news and information about the conflict have become increasingly restricted.

The Free Media Movement (FMM) reports that Internet facilities and roughly 8,000 landline telephones owned by Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) have been shut down in Jaffna since 28 January 2007. SLT, partly owned by the Sri Lankan government, is the sole Internet provider there.

Two Tamil-language newspapers, "Sudaroli" and "Thinakkural", told FMM that they have been unable to send or receive news or photos via email to other newspapers in their media group. Other journalists based in Jaffna are also unable to communicate by e-mail or access the Internet.

Members of the International Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression Mission to Sri Lanka report that newspapers in the city of Galle are suffering from a shortage of newsprint and ink because of road closures and a government ban on such supplies being carried on ships to Jaffna.

The absence of radio and television stations in Jaffna means newspapers are a vital source of news and information for the local population.

Jaffna's best-selling paper, "Uthayan", may be forced to close down in a month if it does not receive more newsprint and ink, warns Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières, RSF). The newspaper, which normally prints 12 pages and sells about 20,000 copies a day, has been reduced to printing four pages and 7,500 copies.

FMM says the violence in Jaffna, in which both sides of the conflict have committed atrocities, has fostered a culture of fear, making it difficult for journalists to corroborate information from sources. "No one is ready to give the details or information regarding any [security-related incident], leading to a situation where rumour and speculation is rife."

Members of the International Mission have written to the Sri Lankan government, calling for the embargo on newsprint and ink to be lifted. "Access to information is key to ensuring stability and to promoting peace," they said. "In the absence of accountable journalism, rumours may become the main source of news for the local population, fuelling instability and violence."