

Media freedom is vital - Justice Imam

Hearing the appeal of the two airmen who were convicted of criminal trespass in connection with Sunday Times Defence Correspondent Iqbal Athas, the Appeal Court Judge observed that media freedom was vital for the existence of democracy in a country.

Appeal Court Judge S. I. Imam made this observation when the appeal filed by two SLAF officers, Squadron Leader H. M. Rukman Herath and Airman Sujeewa Kannangara, who were convicted of criminal trespass and intimidation and sentenced to seven years rigorous imprisonment, was taken up yesterday.

"In a democratic country media plays an important role," Justice Imam said.

The bench comprised Justices S. I. Imam and Sarath de Abrew.

The two convicted Air Force officers had filed the appeal against the High Court judgement against them. They had cited the Attorney General as respondent. The two accused were convicted of criminal trespass and threatening Iqbal Athas and his family on February 12, 1998. They were sentenced to seven years RI, and a fine of Rs. 10,000 was imposed on each.

Making submissions on behalf of the Attorney General, Deputy Solicitor General Dappula de Livera informed court that the two officers had been close friends and attached to the personal security squad of the Air Force Commander. At the time the offence was committed the two accused had been present at the residence of Mr. Athas for a period of between 15 to 20 minutes. They had been identified by Mr. Athas and his wife.

At this stage Justice Imam inquired whether the journalist had written anything relating to the Air Force and DSG Livera stated that a week prior to the said incident he had written an article and before that he had written seven to ten articles relating to corruption in the Air Force.