

IFJ Asia Pacific Regional Leaders Joint Statement to President and Government of Sri Lanka

05/02/2008

We, the representatives of journalists' unions and associations across the Asia-Pacific region, meeting in Kuala Lumpur, appeal to President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Government of Sri Lanka to protect the safety of journalists in Sri Lanka and uphold the rights of the media to report freely.

As Asia-Pacific affiliates and partners of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), jointly fighting for freedom of expression and the safety of journalists in all countries and communities of our region, we are alarmed by the Sri Lankan authorities' overt ridicule for the principles of free expression and the rights of journalists as Sri Lanka descends toward all-out war.

Recent actions by authorities indicate an irresponsible and dangerous disregard for the rights of journalists and media institutions to report freely and without threat of violence. Cases in point include recent public statements by Sri Lanka's Army Commander and Defence Secretary calling for media censorship, the judicial enforcement of criminal defamation and the prosecution of leading media institutions for "critical reportage".

We condemn in the strongest terms the disrespect and outright physical aggression shown by members of the Government and senior public officials toward journalists, media institutions and the right to freedom of speech.

Professional media has a duty and a responsibility to critique the central issues in Sri Lanka's war, to expose corruption and to unearth underlying interests of warring factions. However, journalists and media institutions in Sri Lanka are under extreme pressure to comply with the Government's propaganda on conflict and peace if they want to avoid targeted hate speech and rabid public condemnation. Official censorship and self-censorship are fuelling a dangerous cycle of misinformation and conflict, and journalists are finding it increasingly difficult to act in the public interest.

We are extremely concerned for the safety of our colleagues in Sri Lanka. Journalists and their leaders are directly in the line of fire, whether they are reporting on events in conflict zones or bearing the brunt of the hostility of senior officials and others displeased with independent critical commentary.

We condemn the prevailing culture of impunity in Sri Lanka, which is exemplified by acts of physical and verbal abuse perpetrated by senior authorities targeting the media.

We advise the President and the Government that the failure to bring to account the perpetrators of physical and psychological violence against journalists and to rein in the anti-media activities of government members and other officials sends a message that they have no respect for the rights and safety of journalists and for the range of all rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The anti-media sentiment expressed by officials at various levels underscores a widespread failure to understand that free expression and a strong, independent and critical media are hallmarks of a successful – and peaceful – democracy.

We demand that the President and the Government desist immediately from implicitly or explicitly inciting violence against journalists and media institutions, by way of death threats, intimidation, physical harm and the use of language that incites hate and drives conflict. The Government must put an end to the culture of impunity, including acting against criminal gangs that target journalists.

While we urge the President and the Government to lead the way, we demand that other groups in Sri Lanka, including paramilitary groups and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also desist from committing or inciting violence against journalists.

We strongly support our colleagues in the Federation of Media Employee's Trade Unions (FMETU), the Free Media Movement (FMM), the Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association (SLWJA), the Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF) and the Sri Lanka Tamil Journalists' Alliance (SLTJA) in their demands that the Government urgently implement the following measures.

- Halt all threats, harassment, abductions and attacks against journalists, media workers and media institutions perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, in particular on, but not limited to, the Tamil-language media.
- Refrain from all interference in editorial independence, including the use of economic or legal sanctions, such as restrictions on newsprint, the indiscriminate use of search and seizure powers by the tax authorities or the freezing of assets, to interfere in the publication of a newspaper.
- Cease using informal means, such as direct calls to newsrooms and editorial offices, to influence media coverage and editorial lines.
- Desist from the dangerous and irresponsible practice of publicly vilifying journalists and media workers in a manner likely to endanger their lives and those of their families and invite the authorities, political parties and community leaders to demonstrate a clear and unambiguous rejection of the targeting of media by incitement and language likely to excite hostility.
- Amend or revoke all Sri Lankan legislation, regulations and powers, particularly the emergency regulations of August 2005, the Prevention of Terrorism and Specified Terrorist Activities Regulations of December 2006, the Official Secrets Act, Press Council Laws and broadcasting laws that fail to meet international standards on press freedom and freedom of expression.

Signed by leaders of the following organisations, in Kuala Lumpur for the regional meeting of IFJ Asia-Pacific:

Aliansi Jurnalists Independen (AJI)

Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA)
All India Newspaper Employees Federation (AINEF)
Association of Taiwan Journalists (ATJ)
Cambodian Association for Protection of Journalists (CAPJ)
Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, New Zealand (EPMU)
Federation of Media Employee's Trade Unions (FMETU)
Free Media Movement (FMM)
Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ)
Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA)
IFJ Asia Pacific
Indian Journalists Union (IJU)
National Union of Journalists, Malaysia (NUJM)
Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA)
Nepal Press Union (NPU)
National Union of Journalists (India) (NUJI)
National Union of Journalists, Nepal (NUJN)
National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP)
Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ)
Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA)