



Government Comments “Disturbing”, and Journalist Still Missing in Sri Lanka

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The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has expressed its growing concern over the worsening situation in Sri Lanka, which has seen another journalist disappear, and the government make particularly disturbing statements on the state of the media.

Grave fears for missing journalist

According to an IFJ affiliate, the Free Media Movement (FMM), Subramaniam Ramachandran, correspondent for the dailies Yarl Thinakkural and Valampuri has been missing from northern peninsula Jaffna since February 15, when he didn't return home from work.

“The IFJ has grave fears for the safety of Ramachandran, who has been missing now for more than 11 days, especially in light of the shocking situation in Jaffna where abductions and retaliatory killings occur all too regularly,” IFJ President Christopher Warren said.

The FMM reports that since January 2005, 802 persons have disappeared in Jaffna peninsula, and in February alone 15 people have been gunned down by unknown assailants and nine have been abducted.

Minister makes disturbing comments on quashing dissent

The IFJ has joined the FMM, and four other journalists' organisations, including the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, the Federation of Media Employees Trade Union, the Sri Lanka Muslim Media Foundation and the Sri Lanka Tamil Journalists Alliance, in condemning statements from the Sri Lankan Environment and Natural Resources Minister, Champika Ranawaka, which basically advocated brutal suppression of democratic dissent, and the use of extra-judicial methods if necessary.

According to the journalists' organisations, the Minister, in a statement made to the Ravaya newspaper on the February 18, said: “People will die, what can we do about it. Are you asking us to leave those alive? Those bastards are traitors. We can't do anything because of wild donkey freedom in this country,

if those can't be dealt with existing laws we know how to do it. If we can't suppress those bastards with the law we need to use any other ways and means," (translated from Sinhala).

The IFJ president said: "We are frankly speechless that a minister of government, who reportedly is in close contact with the president, could publicly show such total disrespect for human rights and blatantly disown all democratic principles."

According to the five organisations, the minister also has identified many prominent human rights activists, journalists and civil society leaders as terrorists in the past.

"This is really going too far. We echo the demands from the Sri Lankan journalists' organisations, for clarification from the government on what is essentially hate speech from a member of parliament," Warren said.

President says licenses granted for political support

Furthermore, the IFJ is shocked by comments from President Mahinda Rajapaksa to the Executive Committee of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) on February 10, which indicated he provided television and radio licenses to the JVP (People's Liberation Front) to recognise the support they provided during his election campaign.

"For a head of state to say something as irresponsible and compromising as this, is a further indication of the Sri Lankan government's retreat from democracy," Warren said.

FMM misrepresented on defence ministry website

The FMM has written to the Ministry of Defence demanding an amendment to an article published on their website on February 9 which gave false and misleading information about the journalists' organisation.

The FMM first contacted the Ministry on February 12 asking for their immediate action, and again on February 19, regarding a story written by Walter Jayawardhana, which incorrectly indicated the organisation had requested the release of three arrested journalists, who worked for the trade union publication Akuna, and were organising a protest campaign for their freedom.

The website also contained an archived photo which bore no relation to the article and portrayed the FMM in a misleading manner.

"The IFJ supports the FMM in its attempts to gain a retraction from the Ministry; the article is incorrect and could potentially be used to disparage the organisation and its members," Warren said.