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International Federation of Journalists

The “Government Can No Longer Turn a Blind Eye” to the Terrible Situation in Sri Lanka

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) is deeply concerned by more reports of kidnappings, threats, intimidation and newspaper closures, which indicate Sri Lanka is sliding further away from a free, safe and open society.

“Every day there are more reports of terrible incidents occurring in Sri Lanka,” IFJ President Christopher Warren said.

“Journalists are disappearing, newspapers are being shutdown, and media workers live in fear for their lives and independence,” Warren said.

“The Sri Lankan government can no longer turn a blind eye as the safety and press freedom situation deteriorates further,” said Warren, the president of the IFJ, the organisation representing more than 500,000 journalists in more than 115 countries.

“Something must be done.”

Armed groups threaten female journalist

According to IFJ affiliate, the Free Media Movement (FMM) a group of armed persons visited the workplace of Pathma Kumari, *Lankadeepa* newspaper provincial correspondent for the Kalpitiya area, Puttalam district, and made inquiries about her on March 29.

Kumari made a complaint to the Kalpitiya police about the incident, and is very concerned for her safety, particularly given the particular political climate where abductions and disappearances are commonplace, the FMM reports.

Kumari has reportedly been covering drug smuggling and the seizing of fishing boats by various groups.

Kumari is also the Kalpitiya correspondent for The Daily Mirror, Neth FM and the treasurer of Puttalam district journalists association.

Military abduction of journalist

According to local reports, the Sri Lankan military participated in the abduction of journalist Subramaniam Ramachandra, who has been missing for five weeks.

Since a Sri Lankan police chief admitted security forces were involved in Ramachandra’s abduction, it is believed Ramachandra is being held at a secret military camp somewhere in the country.

Prior to his abduction in the Vadamaradchi area north of Jaffna, Ramachandra had written for Tamil daily Yarl Thinakural about the involvement of a businessman and military officers in illegal sand trafficking.

Hate speech in prominent daily newspaper

The dangerous trend to publicly target and slander journalists and press freedom and human rights activists is continuing unhindered in Sri Lanka.

The government has launched a public vicious attack on human rights and media freedom activists, and journalists' organisations, including the FMM, on the eve of the Human Rights Commission sittings in Geneva.

According to the FMM, there have been a number of talk shows, and articles vilifying human rights defenders.

On March 27, government mouthpiece, the *Daily News*, wrote "Many self-appointed peaceniks and spokesmen are in Geneva these days. They are not only enjoying the cool climate in Geneva but on a mission to bad mouth the country of their birth - for a few dollars MORE. Tomorrow it's the turn of the man who organised a media conference to LTTEs Manirasakulam camp in the name of Free Media or something like that, some time ago. Know what they call themselves? - Asian Human Rights Defenders. Its time we rally behind Mother Lanka to protect her from these men."

Two newspapers forced to close down

The Standard Newspaper Group, publishers of *Mawbima* and *Sunday Standard*, announced on March 28 the decision to stop the publication of both newspapers due to various pressures exerted by the government.

According to the FMM, on March 13 the government sealed the bank accounts of Standard Newspaper Private Limited, and the accounts of all other business establishments partly or fully owned by the Standard Newspaper Private Limited group owner Tiran Allas, have also been sealed.

This is the last in a long list of attacks on Mawbima, including the arrest and detention of a journalist and financial director of the newspaper, which has reportedly published regular investigative articles exposing massive corruption prevailing inside the government ministries and state institutions.

Newsprint shortage prohibits media diversity

There has still been no change in the newsprint shortage situation in the country's north.

According to the FMM, communities in the country's north are increasingly isolated and misinformed after the closure of the A9 road connecting Jaffna and Vavuniya, which has prevented the much needed newsprint from being transported from Colombo.

The affected communities reportedly have little access to television or internet, so without newsprint they are deprived of essential information.

***Udayan* newspaper editor begs for respite from violence**

The chief editor of Jaffna-based daily newspaper *Udayan* has written to the Editors Guild of Sri Lanka, begging for attention to the plight of the troubled region's media.

In a letter dated March 21, N.V. Kanamailnathan wrote that the Tamil newspaper's daily operations had become a dangerous, "Herculean" task, with armed persons regularly threatening journalists at work.

The FMM distributed Kanamailnathan's letter, which described three recent harrowing incidents at *Udayan*.

Kanamailnathan said that last September, armed men in civilian dress infiltrated the *Udayan* office and threatened senior staff – the men were reportedly members of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces.

Earlier, in May 2006, six armed men allegedly walked in the *Udayan* office and opened fire; two employees were killed and another four were injured.

Worsening situation

"Hate speech is a dangerous game, and places the lives of the human rights defenders and journalists and their families in danger," the IFJ president said.

"The IFJ demands an immediate end to this public vilification and for protections to be put in place to ensure those targeted by these reports are not harmed," Warren said.

"Furthermore, the IFJ calls for the instant release of Ramachandra, for an investigation into Kumari's case and for the Sri Lankan government to allow journalists to work without the threat of abduction or intimidation," Warren said

"We also reiterate our calls for the government to intervene and ensure that newsprint be included in the limited stocks transported from Colombo to Jaffna, to cease from targeting critical publications, such as *Mawbima*, and ensure greater protections for journalists working in the north, and the staff of *Udayan*."

"The government has the power to alter this situation. It is time for the Sri Lankan government to use this power to protect the country's journalists, its media freedoms and ultimately the human rights of their citizens."