

Jaffna journalists fearful amid threats, killings

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The campaign of intimidation backed up by deadly violence has compelled Sri Lankan journalists of all ethnicities to flee Sri Lanka. But unlike their southern colleagues, journalists in the Jaffna have no easy escape and media institutions in the northern peninsula are appealing for international support in the face of threats by Army-backed paramilitaries.



In an urgent appeal issued this week, the Jaffna Journalists Union urged international media groups to protest the targeting of reporters in Jaffna.

The Union singled out the targeting of individuals associated with the Jaffna-based Tamil News and Information Centre (TNIC), a registered non-governmental organisation whose board includes local reporters, Jaffna university lecturers, and civil society activists,

Two of TNIC's members had been murdered by gunmen and many others were facing death threats from Army-backed paramilitaries, the Union said.

On February 1, one of the TNIC's patrons, Mr. S. T. Gananathan, was shot dead barely 200 meters from the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) camp at Mampalam junction in Ariyalai.

Mr. Gananathan, 64, had been President of the Jaffna Multi Purpose Co-Operative Society (MPCS).

His predecessor, Mr. Solomen Sri, left Jaffna in December 2005 after receiving death threats.

The night before he was shot dead, the 'Ithayaveenai' radio station run by the Army-backed paramilitary group and political party, EPDP, had lambasted Mr. Gananathan, Jaffna journalists said.

Among other politically motivated killings, the EPDP has been blamed for the killing of BBC correspondent M. Nimalrajan, also in Jaffna, in 2000.

In August 2006, one of TNIC's directors, Mr. Sinnathamby Sivamaharajah, a former Parliamentarian, was also shot dead at his home located inside the Army's High Security Zone (HSZ) in Tellipallai.

Mr. Sivamaharajah, 68, had been the Managing Director of Jaffna Tamil daily 'Namathu Eelanadu' until his death.

"In addition to the death threats issued via anonymous telephone calls, unidentified gunmen rampaged into the [Jaffna] office of TNIC," the Jaffna Journalists' Union said in its statement.

The gunmen threatened forced staff at gun point to provide details of the TNIC's Media Cordonator, Mr. J. Barathy and its International Coordinator, Mr. K. Kandeepan, the Union said.

The two are the most active journalists working to bring abductions by paramilitaries to light, the Union said.

Personal details and photographs of the two men were taken away by the gunmen, who destroyed documents, videos and other collected material being kept in the TNIC office.

The following day, the homes of the two journalists were raided, again by unidentified gunmen.

Death threats are being made to other TNIC staff and members, accusing them of being spies for the LTTE and saying that Mr. Sivamaharajah and Mr. Gananathan were killed as they were LTTE agents