

Sri Lanka journalists march against intimidation

Dozens of Sri Lankan journalists took to the streets Thursday to condemn censorship and support a columnist who exposed alleged corruption in the purchase of second-hand supersonic jets. Reporters, cameramen and editors carried placards and chanted slogans outside the main railway station in Colombo, expressing solidarity with Iqbal Athas of the Sunday Times.

His weekly Situation Report was not published after the government withdrew police bodyguards who had been assigned to protect him for over nine years, his newspaper said.

"Defend investigative reporting," said a placard carried by one journalist. "Corruption reporting is our right," read another. Media rights groups said Athas feared for his life. The plight of Athas came as international media activists last week warned of worsening conditions in one of the world's most dangerous places for journalists.

Five media organisations, including the Free Media Movement (FMM), took part in Thursday's lunch-time protest.

Rights groups have said the situation for journalists has worsened as Sri Lanka presses for a military victory over Tamil rebels in a 35-year-old conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives. Over 5,400 people have been killed since December 2005, according to official figures, while human rights groups report that over 1,000 people have "disappeared" in the past year.