

Para-Military group threatens Tamil news paper"UTHAYAN"

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A hitherto unknown group has threatened to kill all the employees of the Tamil-language newspaper Uthayan, the leading newspaper in the Jaffna peninsula, if they have not resigned by the end of today.

"You have ignored many of our previous warnings," said a message in Tamil signed by the group that was sent to the newspaper last weekend. "As a result we demand that Uthayan's journalists, employees, agents and guards formally resign by 30 June. Those not complying will be subjected to the death penalty."

With the deadline expiring in just a few hours, Reporters Without Borders sends a message of solidarity to all of the Uthayan press group's employees. The managing director E. Saravanapavan, who has gone to Jaffna to better protect his employees, told Reporters Without Borders that the army, police and main Tamil parties have condemned the threats and taken measures to protect the newspaper.

"More than half of our staff have not come to work because of these threats," Saravanapavan said. "Yesterday only two of our oldest journalists wrote articles. The newspaper was distributed this morning but with great difficulty (...) The armed forces commander in Jaffna and the police chief have told me that the safety of the Uthayan office will be guaranteed."

Two additional policemen have been assigned to protecting the newspaper while soldiers have been stationed nearby. Saravanapavan has two bodyguards. Two employees were killed when gunmen attacked the newspaper's building in May 2006, an incident that was never properly investigated.

"Such is the climate of violence and intolerance in which the authorities plan to hold local elections in Jaffna in August," Reporters Without Borders said. "The ability of Uthayan, a critic of the pro-governmental Tamil parties, to publish safely is a crucial test of the credibility of this already controversial election. Without press freedom, there are no free elections."

Reporters Without Borders calls on the Tamil parties participating in the elections to pledge to respect press freedom. "It is encouraging to see that the TNA, TULF and EPDP have condemned the threats against Uthayan," Reporters Without Borders added. "But more than words are needed if Jaffna's journalists are finally going to have acceptable conditions in which to work."

The message sent by the Tamil United Force to Safeguard the Country accused Uthayan of "causing confusion among the Tamils by publishing reports aimed at making them side with the 'terrorists' and inciting racial hatred in order to destroy the Tamils and the basis for a permanent freedom that has now been achieved."

The threats are clearly designed to silence a newspaper that has often criticized Tamil political parties that support the government in Colombo.

A Jaffna-based journalist told Reporters without Borders that "the threats terrify all journalists in the peninsula." Many Jaffna journalists suspect the EPDP of being behind the threats. A militia led by Douglas Devananda, a government minister, the EPDP has been implicated in many press freedom violations.

Unidentified thugs burned hundreds of copies of Uthayan five days ago in Jaffna and threatened to kill a distributor. A guard was injured when a grenade exploded outside the newspaper's building on 24 March.

Meanwhile, Reporters Without Borders hopes that the police will identify the source of telephone threats made against the editor of Sudar Oli, a newspaper that is part of the Uthayan group. The threatening calls were made from 0772487667 and 0778114377, numbers that are registered in the north of the Jaffna peninsula, in an EPDP-controlled area.