

Press freedom struggles in Sri Lanka

(Wednesday, 29 November 2006) - Written by Subha Arulvarathan, Copy Editor

Disappearances, censorship and draconian law rule in the Sri Lankan press "Damn shame, off target again!" It was the bold headline of a special feature dedicated to the latest bombings in several regions of Sri Lanka, simply printed beneath the red logo for The Saturday Review, a publication based in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The English-language newspaper was founded in 1982 and abruptly stopped in 1987, three months after the bombing of its publishing house.

R. Cheran, a professor at the University of Windsor and an external research associate of York's Centre for Refugee Studies, was one of the three editors of The Saturday Review to witness its demise. He presented original copies of the newspaper that he had managed to preserve; they were slightly tattered tabloid-size pages with text that occasionally appear to be unaligned. Upon closer inspection, there were some articles that would intentionally omit bylines. In contrast to other Western publications that relied on mechanical printing presses and advanced technology, Cheran described The Saturday Review's painstaking printing process that was "typeset by hand and printed with two ancient letterpresses." Most of the time, there was no electricity anyway. "In 1982, there weren't any independent or courageous English-language media to report on the atrocities of the government and to also advocate for human rights in the country," Cheran explained. "So, a group of human rights activists and some senior Tamil journalists decided to publish an English-language weekly from Jaffna to focus on human rights violations and advocate for Tamil rights in Sri Lanka."

Ever since Sri Lanka's independence from England in 1948, tensions between the Sri Lankan government (dominated by the Sinhalese majority) and the Tamil minority has been slowly on the rise. Former president S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), came into power in 1956 and exploited Sinhalese nationalism by touting a "Sinhalese-only" campaign. Sinhalese became the sole official language and Buddhism became the state religion under Sirima Bandaranaike, who followed in her husband's footsteps to become president, in the 1960s. Tamils, who were relatively prosperous under British rule, felt further alienated as the number of their people employed by the state and admitted into institutions of higher learning became greatly restricted. Tamils had originally responded through political demands and non-violent protests, but the increasing ineffectiveness of their actions led to the rise of militant Tamil groups. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was one of the most powerful groups and by 1986, they became the only group to dominate the north and east of Sri Lanka. The LTTE's objective was to create a state independent of Sri Lanka called Tamil Eelam, which consisted of the northern and eastern provinces where a majority of the Tamils reside. Under this political climate, Cheran, who was studying at the University of Jaffna at the time, was very much part of the university student movements. "The University of Jaffna was the epicentre of the antigovernment struggle for the minority rights and Tamils rights. Basically, it was the hotbed for Tamil nationalism. At that point, we didn't call it Tamil nationalism; it was called national liberation struggle for the Tamils," Cheran explained. In response, the Sri Lankan government on July 15, 1979 declared Emergency Rule and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, legislations that are still in

effect today. The former empowers executives to arrest and detain suspects without charge, proscribe political parties and ban publications. The latter allows the detention of suspects without the levying of charges for 18 months, confers powers of search, arrest and seizure without warrant in connection with "any unlawful activity," and also guarantees officers of the state immunity from prosecution for any action taken under the act. "It was a very draconian law. We were very young, but a group of us were arrested under the law just because we were demonstrating," Cheran said of his first brush with trouble. He spoke slowly but confidently, the words drawn out and weighed down as he recounted the history of the paper and his experience working for The Saturday Review. He started working for the paper in 1984. Including himself, there were three people in the editorial staff working at the office. Gamini Navaratne was a well-respected and progressive Sinhalese journalist and A.J. Canagaratne was an English lecturer at the University of Jaffna. By this time, the paper had already garnered the respect of the international community from organizations like the United Nations and Amnesty International. This was especially due the paper's reporting of the government's atrocities in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka and its coverage of the July 23, 1983 riot. Sparked by an attack that occurred the day before by a militant Tamil group on a Sinhalese army convoy in Jaffna where 15 out of 17 soldiers lost their lives, 2,000

Tamil civilians were killed and another 200,000 were forced from their homes in capital city of Colombo. Cheran referred to it as a pogrom, "a very systematic attack on selective targets with genocidal intent." Due to its critical reporting, the paper was banned and its offices sealed off in July 1983. The founding editor, S. Sivanayagam, was forced to go underground immediately after the ban was placed to save his life - the editorial staff and those that had been part of the newspaper at the time were all quickly placed under arrest. "At the time, there were no functioning police in the area, only the army because the government withdrew all the police force and the Sri Lankan army was responsible. So, an arrest by them is a sure certificate for death," concluded Cheran. Even after the ban was lifted a year later in May 1984, the paper faced censorship. "At that time, not a single newspaper in Sri Lanka was censored except our newspaper. It would mean that we had to send all the material to Colombo, including the advertisements, for censorship 360 miles away." Though censorship was eventually ended by the Sri Lankan government in 1985, due to international pressure,

Tharma Balan, a senior civil servant, was appointed as a special censor. "I wasn't under the position to write everything under my own name because security authorities were always monitoring our newspaper," admitted Cheran. "It has been a real difficult time because on one hand, we've been very critical about the government; on the other hand, we've also been critical about the various Tamil militant groups when they engaged in human rights violations." Indeed, Cheran's essay, "Salad Days," published in *To Arrive Where You Are: Literary Journalism from The Banff Centre*, recounted his first-hand experience of one day in 1985, when Sri Lankan soldiers armed with submachine guns stormed his office. Forced to lie on the floor of the personnel carrier vehicle, he was kicked on the way to Gurunagar, a military camp on the outskirts of Jaffna. He was then held in a tiny cell before he was beaten again, to the point that he lost consciousness. Luckily, he was released. Unfortunately, Cheran's experience is not dated. The safety of journalists, particularly those who are Tamil, are threatened by both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Murders, arrests, threats and

bombings have again become common for many reporters, especially for those who work in the north and east of the country.

One of the more well-known cases is of Dharmaratnam Sivaram (also known as "Taraki"), a renowned Tamil journalist and head of the news website TamilNet and editorialist of The Daily Mirror, a daily English-language newspaper published in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He was abducted in front of the Bambalapitya police station in the capital city on April 25, 2005. His body was found near Sri Lanka's Parliament the next day. According to the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Removal of Persons (an euphemism for disappearances), Sri Lanka is only second to Iraq in terms of recorded disappearances. This applies only to the reported cases of the Sri Lankan government and does not include the activities of the various militant groups in the north and south. In addition to this fact, the government, according to Cheran, never follows up on the murders and kidnapping of reporters and hundreds of civilians. The investigations of the murders of journalists Sinnathamby Sivamaharajah, Sampath Lakmal de Silva and Subramaniam Sugitharajah have not been carried out, yet this is only limited to 2006 and does not include other media workers. "If you compare the number of disappearances and assassinations of journalists, writers and intellectuals, it ranks among the top 10 in the world,"

Cheran added. He paused and said almost resignedly, "So all in all, you're looking at about almost 50 of my colleagues, writers and journalists who have disappeared or killed by the Indian army, by the government of Sri Lanka and by various militant groups, including the LTTE, all together. "So in fact, you know, the situation is still the same." Understandably, many journalists don't want to get on the bad side of either the government or the LTTE. According to Cheran, for the most part, the government has no need to use censorship. "You know that one of the serious issues in media freedom in Sri Lanka in English language, in Sinhalese or Tamil, it's not so much of official censorship, but the question of complicity and self-censorship on the part of the media. "Here is a serious problem with the way that the media behave and articulate its independence and its commitment to freedom and freedom of expression." He lamented the current state of Sri Lankan newspapers in all three languages. "The largest and biggest publication industry is controlled by the government, Lake House. All the other newspapers are published either by big businessmen or corporations. With the exception of one Sinhalese language weekly run by a courageous journalist, the one and only independent Tamil weekly was the one that we published that's no longer in existence. "There are no truly free and independent newspapers in Sri Lanka." The copies of The Saturday Review that Cheran displayed with their grainy black-and-white photographs and their yellowing pages start to resemble relics with every passing minute. "I don't know if you're aware of this, but most of the journalists all over the world are alcoholics," he said, laughing the statement off. Now it's easy to understand why.