

Sri Lanka media freedom under threat: rights group

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COLOMBO (AFP) - Nine media workers have been killed in Sri Lanka over the past 15 months, rights groups said Wednesday, voicing concerns over deteriorating conditions for journalists.

No one has been charged over the deaths, leading to fears that media freedom is being deliberately and violently suppressed through threats, abductions and attacks, they said.

"Three reporters and six people working in media organisations have been killed in the past 15 months, but no one has been caught so far," said Sunanda Deshapriya, convener of the Free Media Movement in Sri Lanka.

He added that senior government ministers have recently accused media organisations of aiding and abetting militant activities amid a spike in fighting with Tamil Tiger rebels.

"Naming and shaming media organisations as 'Tiger organisations' without evidence is a deliberate attempt to suppress the media in this country," Deshapriya said.

"We are very concerned, we are afraid if this tempo is allowed to continue."

Deshapriya was speaking at the release of the International Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression Mission report here, which described Sri Lanka as one of the most dangerous places for journalists in South Asia.

International media rights groups discovered in a fact-finding mission last October that authorities were reluctant to probe murders and attacks.

They said authorities were not taking human rights violations seriously, "leading towards a crisis in confidence" by media organisations in the government.

Although Sri Lanka has no censorship laws, columnists had also complained they were under pressure to practice self-censorship.

"Those refusing to toe the government's line may be labelled as spies or traitors," the report said.

Media activists have accused the government of imposing unofficial censorship in the northern peninsula of Jaffna, the Tamil heartland, where two Tamil newspaper employees were shot dead last year by unidentified gunmen.

Journalists from the Sinhalese community also have been either killed, beaten or intimidated for their coverage of the conflict between the government and the rebels, who are fighting for independence for minority Tamils.

"The willingness of politicians and others to denounce the media reinforces self-censorship and makes the free expression of opinion a life-threatening activity," the authors warned.

Local media rights groups also demanded Sri Lankan authorities immediately free a Tamil journalist detained under anti-terror laws for months without charge.

"Journalist Maunasami Parameswarae has been detained for over 100 days without any charges. We are now asking the government to release her," Deshapriya said.

The tough Prevention of Terrorism laws invoked by the government in December allows police and security forces to detain suspects for long periods without trial.