

Independent voices being silenced in Sri Lanka

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) is deeply concerned about the steady erosion of press freedom in Sri Lanka, following reports of the media being denied access to war zones, incidents of self-censorship and intimidation, and news journalists were forced to flee the country out of fear for their safety.

"The Sri Lankan media is increasingly struggling to operate freely and without fear in recent months, which is resulting in a significant decline in the number of independent voices in the country," IFJ President Christopher Warren said.

According to local reports, the Sri Lankan army has prevented the press on several occasions from entering combat zones and regions controlled by the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), including strategic towns in North and East, for the past several months.

"When journalists are unable to provide on-the-ground reports, their ability to report accurately and objectively is compromised," Warren said.

"With the overwhelming amount of rumour and propaganda coming from all sides of the conflict, the restriction on journalists' access is only resulting in an uninformed public," he said.

The IFJ calls on all parties to ensure journalists are able to move freely and safely throughout Sri Lanka, including war zones.

Journalists have also reportedly been forced to flee the country out of fear for their safety.

According to an IFJ affiliate, the Free Media Movement (FMM), continuous death threats have forced three prominent journalists - Anurudha Lokuhappuarrachi, a senior photographer for Reuters, Rohitha Bashana Abeywardane, a freelance reporter, and S. Rajkumar, president of the Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance (SLMTA) and Colombo news manager of the UK-based Theepam TV- to leave Sri Lanka in the latter part of 2006.

Their return is uncertain due to the deteriorating security situation in the country.

Furthermore, fears the Emergency (Prevention and Prohibition of Terrorism and Specified Terrorist Activities) Regulations, enacted last month, would be used to restrict freedom of expression are proving to be valid with new reports of arrests and the interrogation of journalists under these laws.

According to the FMM, three state journalists - Sunday Observer associate editor Lionel Yodasinghe and news editor Ranga Jayasuriya, and Silumina journalist Prasanna Fonseka - were interrogated under these new laws on December 21 after they published reports on defence issues.

The FMM reports the new anti-terrorism laws are also encouraging self-censorship. Leading investigative journalist Iqbal Attas reportedly admitted to censoring himself from writing critically on "security issues" in his column in The Sunday Times on December 17.

"Fears of being arrested under these laws are having a chilling effect on journalistic integrity, which means the truth is often getting buried, and critical journalism is suffering," said the president of the IFJ, the organisation representing more than 500,000 journalists in over 115 countries.

Additionally, government inaction and the continued conflict have resulted in the closure of the A9 highway between Colombo and Jaffna, which has had a damaging effect on the media in the North.

According to the FMM, the price of newsprint has reportedly tripled in recent weeks due to the road closure, and the Tamil dailies Uthayan, Valampuri and Yarl Thinakkural have been forced to cut their pages by half.

Despite appeals from the Government Agent of Jaffna, the defence ministry has reportedly refused permission to bring in the much-needed newsprint, without which the newspapers may be forced to cease publication altogether.

“It is absolutely disgraceful that the government can allow the closure of such vital publications simply because of the price of newsprint. By denying access to newsprint the government is denying the Sri Lankan people access to a plurality of voices; and this is simply unacceptable,” Warren said.

Additionally, many of the journalists working for Valampuri and Yarl Thinakkural have reportedly been threatened because of their coverage of the situation in the Jaffna peninsula.

“Restricted access to information, self-censorship, editorial interference and intimidation are all enemies of press freedom, and this is only exacerbating the already fragile environment in Sri Lanka,” the IFJ president said.

“The IFJ demands the Sri Lankan government put an end to the climate of fear that is engulfing the country, and thereby ensure the Sri Lankan people’s right to a free and independent media is preserved.”