

Sri Lanka media freedom, human rights, law and order sliding

by Barry Parker

May 22, 2007 (AFP) - Cases of murder, abduction, disappearance and intimidation surface almost daily in Sri Lanka as the South Asian nation appears to be sliding into lawlessness and war.

With a truce between the government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in tatters and peace talks long since abandoned, rights workers and the media fear the situation is spiralling out of control.

The government is pressing for a military victory over the Tigers, and a series of tit-for-tat clashes have left heavy casualties on both sides -- as well as discrepancies over the true body count.

But away from the front lines, bloodshed is just as frequent and usually involves civilians, although it is seldom clear who is behind the day-to-day violence.

"The situation is out of control," said Sunander Deshapriya of the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a private think tank.

"What we are seeing today is uncertainty. We do not know who is doing what. It is very difficult to find out who is responsible, violence is so widespread," Deshapriya said.

"It is also very difficult to see the situation improving."

Almost 5,000 people have been killed since December 2005, according to the defence ministry.

And more than 700 people are reported to have "disappeared" in the past year in Sri Lanka, where at least 60,000 people have been killed in the Tamil separatist conflict since 1972.

Such a climate of fear has not been seen on the island since 1987-1990, when the army crushed a Marxist Sinhalese uprising at the official cost of 16,750 dead and thousands more missing.

Britain halted debt relief this month in anger at the government's human rights record, and major donor Japan is reviewing its position. Germany stopped aid last December.

The United States has also dropped the usual diplomatic niceties, publicly accusing Sri Lanka of renegeing on promises to protect human rights.

"People are more fearful and face more difficulties. Overall, there has been a deterioration in Sri Lanka's human rights record," said US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher on a visit to Sri Lanka this month.

He travelled to the northern Jaffna peninsula, where 350,000 civilians and 40,000 government troops have lived under virtual siege conditions since the army closed the only land access in August after rebel attacks.

Laxman Gunasekera, president of the South Asian Free Media Alliance (SAFMA) in Sri Lanka, said abductions were rampant -- "but not a single government authority is prepared to acknowledge abductions and give us a figure."

"We have an impression of a lack of control by the state itself," he said.

Sri Lanka's Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe told AFP the lack of official figures was a "lacuna" and said

the government was battling to ensure a human rights commission functioned independently.

This involved setting up a witness protection scheme and safe houses, and arranging for political asylum in the West when necessary.

"It's a serious situation we have to grapple with," he said. "I know it's hard for people to understand that we are making progress."

The minister pointed to the ongoing return of thousands of refugees to eastern areas where troops have captured territory from the LTTE.

But journalist groups accuse authorities of trying to silence anyone who dissents from the official line.

"Journalists face public abuse, violent physical assault, threats, deaths, abduction and murder ... in all parts of the country," including LTTE-held areas, said SAFMA's Gunasekera.

"The picture is not one of improvement, but worsening conditions," he said. "The reality is bleak."

The independent Sri Lanka Press Institute is creating a safety fund to help journalists facing death threats. It is looking at providing mobile phones to local reporters and running a safe house in the capital.

Tamil journalists have borne the brunt of the onslaught. Several told AFP they live in fear for their lives and can no longer work normally or risk using their names on air or in print.

In eastern Batticaloa district, only one Tamil journalist remains at work today, several months after the army ousted the LTTE from the Tamil-majority area. Others have fled, among them the president of a Tamil journalists union.

Nadesapillai Vithyatharan, chief editor of the Tamil-language Uthayan newspaper -- the only paper to publish in Jaffna for the last 20 years without interruption -- refuses to back down.

He says he will not close despite a squeeze from the authorities which has resulted in the daily cutting its pages from 20 to four, and printing on any paper it can find.

Circulation has dropped from 24,000 to 4,000.

"We have lost five staff in the last 18 months," he said. "I have had grenades tossed into my room, but I am ready for anything."