

Sri Lankan government ally suspected in murder of BBC's Jaffna correspondent

By Our Correspondent
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More than 4,000 mourners participated in a funeral procession for Mylvaganam Nimalarajan, 36, a well-known journalist who was shot and killed by a gang of unidentified gunmen in his home in Jaffna town, in northern Sri Lanka, on the night of October 19.

Nimalarajan was a regular contributor to the BBC's Sinhala and Tamil language programs, *Sandeshaya* and *Tamil Osai*, and a correspondent for the Colombo-based Tamil daily *Virakesari* and *Ravaya*, a Sinhala language weekly. He was also the secretary of the Northern Journalists Association.

Nimalarajan's killers entered his home around 10 p.m., slit the throat of his 65-year-old father, Sangarpillai Mylvaganam, injuring but not killing him, and shot the journalist in the head, killing him instantly. They then lobbed a grenade into the house wounding his mother, Lilly Mylvaganam, 62, and his nephew, Jegathas Prasanna, 11.

The Editors Guild and the Free Media Movement along with political parties and volunteer organisations in Jaffna have condemned the murder. Journalists and their supporters in the northern town of Vavuniya staged a protest demonstration on October 24. Another protest organised by Colombo journalists' associations and other groups was held the following day in the capital.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has also protested the killing, commenting in its statement: "Nimalarajan was one of the few sources of independent news from the Jaffna peninsula, where journalists aren't allowed free access."

The ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) regime enforces a complete ban on any independent reporting from the country's war zones in the North and East where the

army is engaged in a protracted civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Coverage is limited to occasional escorted visits for small groups of handpicked journalists. The government even refused to allow journalists from the Colombo-based Free Media Movement and *Ravaya* newspaper to attend Nirmalarajan's funeral in Jaffna.

There is little doubt that Nimalarajan was murdered for his exposure of state repression of Tamils on the Jaffna peninsula. He was one of the journalists who first wrote about the mass graves at Chemmani on the outskirts of Jaffna town where about 600 "disappeared" Tamil youth were killed and buried by the armed forces in the mid-1990s.

Already suspicions have been raised that the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), one of the PA's political allies, may have been responsible for the killing. The EPDP, which maintains its own groups of armed thugs, works closely with the security forces on the Jaffna peninsula in maintaining what amounts to martial law in the area. In the recent Sri Lankan elections, the EPDP won four of the nine seats in the Jaffna electoral district. The party demanded and was granted the Northern Rehabilitation Ministry as its price for providing the PA government with a slender parliamentary majority. It will undoubtedly exploit the position to dispense favours to its members and supporters.

One of the rival Tamil parties, the Tamil United Liberation Front, issued a statement indicating that it suspects the EPDP of carrying out the murder. A TULF spokesperson said the immediate reason was that Nimalarajan had written about ballot rigging in the Kayts islands, one of the EPDP's strongholds, and in Jaffna town. The EPDP has denied any involvement, saying that the TULF's statement was "a baseless

allegation”.

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The Student Association of Jaffna University issued a leaflet headlined “Is this the Rehabilitation in Jaffna?” directly accusing the EPDP. “The party which got the ministry of Rehabilitation (North) has rewarded the people with a murder,” it stated. “Nimalarajan was murdered to cover up the genocide of Tamils by the Sri Lankan army and the perpetuation of the group's anarchic rule.”

Following the October 10 election, Nimalarajan reportedly told colleagues that he had earned the wrath of the EPDP, which held him at least partly responsible for its failure to win more votes in Jaffna. He said that he was worried about his safety after receiving several threats.

The journalist lived in a high security zone making it difficult for his killers to get to his home and leave without being detected. The area is tightly controlled by military checkpoints and a special umbrella security system. Moreover, the murder took place during curfew hours. All this points to the complicity, or even active involvement, of the security forces.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has ordered an immediate inquiry into the murder, but it is highly unlikely that the culprits will be identified. The Jaffna press has been subject to physical attacks before and none of the thugs involved have been brought to justice. Earlier this year, the offices of *Uthayan*, a Tamil daily based in Jaffna, were bombed and again the EPDP was accused of being involved. As a secretary of the Northern Journalists Association, Nimalarajan organised a demonstration and protest against the attack. No one has been charged in connection with the bombing.

Whoever killed Nimalarajan did so for definite political ends. His murder took place following an election campaign dominated by Sinhala extremist parties and their anti-Tamil bigotry, and amid fierce fighting in the North and East of the country. The brazen assassination of a well-known journalist was calculated to intimidate anyone who opposes the government and the military or stands up for the basic democratic rights of the Tamil minority.

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