

Armed mob sets fire to Sri Lankan TV/radio station

By Panini Wijesiriwardena
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In the early hours of July 30, an armed mob stormed the Siyatha TV and radio station in central Colombo, and set fire to the premises. Two station employees and a security guard were injured. The attack is part of a continuing campaign of violence and intimidation by pro-government thugs, acting in collusion with the country's security forces. No one has been arrested, despite police claims that they are carrying out "extensive investigations".

According to Siyatha management, 12 masked men armed with T-56 automatic rifles arrived in two cars and raided the complex at around 1.30 a.m. After assaulting the security guard and two other employees, the gang set fire to the main studio with petrol bombs and damaged other areas. Cameras and other equipment were destroyed in the attack, with damage estimated at around 50 million rupees (\$US445,000).

Siyatha news manager Udithamal Hemachandra told the WSWs that the TV station was not able to resume transmission, but that the three radio channels were now operating.

The Siyatha building is located in a high security zone, which is guarded around the clock by heavily armed troops. Significantly, the attack took place just a few hundred metres from Temple Trees, the official residence of President Mahinda Rajapakse. Yet an armed gang was able to drive to the Siyatha station, carry out its attack and flee the area without being challenged—something that is improbable without the involvement of the security forces.

During the 20-minute rampage, management rang the police emergency unit. The nearest police station is less than a kilometre from the Siyatha complex, but it took police almost one hour to arrive. Station co-owner Roshantha Kariyapperuma said the fire brigade took 35

minutes to reach the studios after being informed of the fire.

Police told a court on August 2 that they had not yet identified any suspects, and investigations were continuing. As local and international condemnation poured in, Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said two police teams had been deployed to probe the incident. However, as in previous cases of violence against the media in Sri Lanka, it is unlikely that the thugs involved in the raid will be caught and prosecuted.

Even the right-wing *Island* newspaper expressed its "shock and dismay" over the attack on Siyatha in an editorial, noting "the ease with which the attackers carried out their operation and got away in a heavily guarded city teeming with so many checkpoints and military and police personnel".

Over the past five years since President Rajapakse came to power, pro-government death squads and gangs functioning under the patronage of the security forces have been responsible for hundreds of abductions, murders and violent attacks against the country's Tamil minority, the media and opposition politicians. The thuggery has continued following the May 2009 defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the country's long-running civil war.

The Siyatha media group has not been critical of the government. Its owners—the popular actress Sangeetha Weeraratna, her husband Roshantha Kariyapperuma and his brother Priyantha Kariyapperuma—have been close associates of President Rajapakse and his brothers. Priyantha was appointed as the head of the country's Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC), in what was widely regarded as a pay-off for his support.

During the January presidential elections, however, relations between the Rajapakses and the Kariyapperuma brothers became strained. The *Sunday Times* noted that one of Rajapakse's brothers accused the Kariyapperumas of supporting the opposition presidential candidate—ex-army commander Sarath Fonseka. Priyantha Kariyapperuma was asked to quit his TRC position and the government withdrew advertisements from the media group's newspaper, forcing its closure.

Weeraratna told the *Sunday Leader* that the Siyatha news "has always been unbiased and impartial" and there was "no reason to believe that anyone would want to harm us". She expressed suspicions about an unnamed "competitor" but provided no further details. Of course, a rival might have been involved, but such a brazen attack could not be carried out without the backing of elements in the government and security forces.

The Rajapakse regime is notorious for its suppression of critics. General Fonseka, who is currently a parliamentarian, was closely associated with President Rajapakse as the army commander during the ruthless war against the LTTE. After being sidelined following the LTTE's defeat, Fonseka fell out with the president and contested the presidential elections as an opposition candidate. Just few days after the election, Fonseka was arrested amid lurid government accusations that he had been planning a coup. He is still in military custody facing trial on several trumped-up charges.

In another high-profile case, Lasantha Wickrematunge, former editor of the *Sunday Leader*, was killed in broad daylight in January 2009 while driving to work. He was another one-time ally of President Rajapakse, turned critic and political opponent. His killers were able to flee the scene despite a heavy security presence. No one has ever been charged with his murder.

Just before Wickrematunge's murder, a gang of about 20 masked gunmen broke into MTV/Sirasa network's building in the early hours of the morning, overpowered the guards and ransacked the building. The control room, offices and studios were extensively damaged. Despite being quickly phoned, the police did not arrive until the 30-minute rampage was over. The attack followed denunciations of MTV/Sirasa in the

state-run media for its "unpatriotic" attitude toward the government's war.

Over the past five years, there have been a series of violent attacks on the media, in which at least 14 media workers have been killed. Just before the presidential election in January, *Lankaenews* website journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda disappeared and has not been seen since. Chandana Sirimalwatte, the editor of *Lanka*, the newspaper of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), was detained and only released after a court challenge.

Now Sirimalwatte has been cited for contempt of court for publishing an article on 27 June alleging that President Rajapakse has exerted pressure on the judiciary. The *Lanka* newspaper claimed that a letter had been sent by an assistant presidential secretary to the Judicial Services Commission (JSC) urging the release of a suspect in a bribery case—a supporter of the ruling coalition.

The attack on the Siyatha station is another reminder that the Rajapakse government will not tolerate any, even the most limited, political opposition. It was aimed at further intimidating an already largely tame media establishment in Sri Lanka. The raid is also a warning to the working class of the police-state measures that will be used to suppress any opposition as the government imposes the austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

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