

Amid global war on journalism, Tamil journalists sent death threats in Sri Lanka

By Naveen Dewage
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Seven Tamil journalists based in Sri Lanka's military-occupied Eastern Province have been threatened with death. The threats were issued in Tamil-language leaflets that were slid under the door of the Batticaloa Press Club, a conference hall run by the Batticaloa Tamil Journalists' Association (BTJA), on January 23.

The leaflets, which were discovered by members who planned to use the hall that afternoon, are part of a resurgence of attacks against the media since Gotabhaya Rajapakse was sworn in as Sri Lankan president in November. They were headlined "Warning! Warning!!" and featured a photograph of the seven journalists attending a memorial vigil earlier this month in honour of assassinated *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge.

The leaflets declared: "These are the foreign Tiger-funded reporters who publish news against the government. We will soon deliver the death penalty to them."

Those targeted are Selvakumar Nilanthan (*Tamil Guardian*), Punniyamorthy Sasikaran (Sirasa TV), Kunarasa Supojan and Nallathambi Nithyanathan (Shakthi TV), Krishnakumar (the state-owned Independent Television Network), and Vadivel Sakthivel and Subramaniam Kunalingam from the Jaffna-based newspaper *Thinakkural*.

The acclaimed *Sunday Leader* editor Wickrematunge was murdered in broad daylight on January 8, 2009, as he was driving to his editorial office at Mount Lavinia near Colombo—and just 100 metres from an air force checkpoint and next to a high security zone.

Wickrematunge was critical of former President Mahinda Rajapakse and the war against the separatist Tamil Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He exposed corruption in the military, implicating then defence

secretary and current President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Rajapakse filed a defamation case against him.

In defiance of the latest threats, the BTJA held another memorial vigil on January 25 to commemorate other murdered Sri Lankan journalists. An anonymous media activist told Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka that the January 23 "death sentence" leaflets were "an attempt to intimidate and stop us from demanding justice for our fallen colleagues."

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its Sri Lankan affiliate, the Federation of Media Employees' Trade Union (FMETU), reported that the seven journalists lodged a complaint at the Batticaloa police. Both organisations, as well as Reporters Without Borders (RSF), condemned the threatening leaflets and demanded "proper police protection" for journalists.

The latest threat—like those in the past—was probably instigated by a paramilitary group working with the military or the police. These formations have a long and brutal record of abductions, violent assaults and the murder of journalists and political opponents. Dozens of journalists have been assassinated in Sri Lanka, particularly in the North and the East, over the last decades by paramilitary groups.

On Thursday, members of several journalist associations in Sri Lanka, including the Working Journalist Association and the FMETU, held a "Black January" protest in Colombo to condemn the latest threats and commemorate all media workers killed, disappeared and physically harmed by paramilitary groups.

The January 23 threats against the Batticaloa journalists is just one of several similar incidents reported this month.

• On January 7, *Tamil Guardian* reporter Selvakumar

Nilanthan was summoned to Batticaloa courts after the police charged him with “obstructing the duties of a government official.” He was released on bail later that day and ordered to appear before the court on February 28.

Nilanthan was visited several times by officers from the Eravur Police Station who behaved in a threatening manner. It is believed the police acted on a 10-month-old complaint made by N. Vilvarathnam, head of the Chenkalady Divisional Secretariat, who falsely claimed that the reporter was obstructing his duties. Nilanthan, however, was simply reporting on a protest by local residents against corruption in the divisional secretariat.

- On January 10, Nimanthi Ranasinghe, a court reporter for *Lankadeepa*, went to Mulleriyawa police station near Colombo to record a complaint about a death threat from an underworld thug. The officer in charge (OIC), however, refused to record her complaint because she refused to reveal her source of information. She has now lodged a complaint about how she was treated by the OIC.

- On January 19 an unidentified group vandalised the home of Jaffna-based *Valampuri* journalist I. Rajeskarani in Mannipay, Jaffna. The house was vandalised in December, along with a nearby home that is owned by another journalist.

On January 16, a special Amnesty International report, entitled “Attacks on Human Rights Organisations, Media Organisations and Journalists in Sri Lanka,” noted that there had been “more than a dozen unscheduled visits to human rights and media organisations by the authorities” between last year’s Easter Sunday terrorist attacks and this January.

Human rights and media organisation personnel, the report said, “were questioned about their activities by members of the Sri Lankan Police, including the Criminal Investigation Department and the Terrorism Investigation Division, as well as State Intelligence.”

In December, President Rajapakse met with corporate media heads, advising them to align their publications with his government’s policies. “I anticipate that all the media organisations will fulfil their duty to the country through journalism which helps to uplift the dignity of the country,” he declared.

Death threats, assassinations and disappearances of

journalists were frequent during Rajapakse’s tenure as defence secretary—from 2005 to 2015—when his brother Mahinda was the president.

While former President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe came to power promising to expose and prosecute those responsible for the attacks on media workers, nothing changed. Police investigations into the disappearance of political analyst and cartoonist Prageeth Eknaligoda and the abductions and assaults of *Rivira*’s former editor Upali Tennekoon and the *Nation*’s deputy editor Keith Noyahr and its senior journalist Namal Perera were political delaying tactics and came to nothing.

In fact, the intimidation and harassment of media workers and attacks on freedom of expression continued under the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration. This included the jailing of award-winning writer Shakthika Sathkumara and police threats against artist Malaka Devapriya. Both cases were initiated after complaints to the police by extreme-right Buddhist monks.

The escalating attacks on journalists and media freedom in Sri Lanka is an international phenomenon. The sharpest expression of this is the persecution and jailing of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange in Britain, and the moves to extradite him to US to face espionage charges.

Since Rajapakse’s swearing in as president, Sri Lanka’s corporate media has ignored the escalating intimidation of media workers and not published a word about the death threats issued against the Batticaloa journalists. The growing coercion is part of a broader crackdown against the democratic rights of the working class as the new government, nervous about the eruption of strikes and protests, moves towards authoritarian methods of rule.

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