

## PRESS RELEASE

On the orders of the Defense Secretary, Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Mr. Dushyantha Basnayake, a Director of Standard Newspapers (Pvt.) Limited, and the Publisher of 'Maubima' and 'Sunday Standard' newspapers, was arrested at around 10PM on 26 February by the Terrorist Investigations Division (TID). The arrest took place at the offices of CBE (Pvt.) Limited., where Mr. Basnayake is the Managing Director.

Furthermore, we have been informed by reliable sources that Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa intends to arrest Mr. Tiran Alles, the Chairman of Standard Newspapers (Pvt.) Limited. Until Minister Mangala Samaraweera was relinquished of his duties as the Minister of Ports & Aviation, Mr. Tiran Alles functioned as the Chairman of Airport and Aviation Services Limited.

Following a complaint made by a certain individual a few months ago, Criminal Investigations Division (CID) interviewed Mr. Dushyantha Basnayake. Upon completion of the interview, officers of the CID stated that there were no allegations against Mr. Basnayake and he wasn't even required to make an official statement. A few days after this incident, President Mahinda Rajapaksa himself phoned Mr. Basnayake and expressed his regrets for the inconvenience caused to him. Under these circumstances, it is clearly obvious that Mr. Basnayake has been arrested in order to harass the Maubima newspaper.

After Ministers Mangala Samaraweera and Sripathi Sooriyaarachchi were dismissed, the President convened a meeting of the Executive Committee of the SLFP in order to give his reasons for the dismissal of two senior Ministers. At the ensuing press conference, President Rajapaksa was very critical of Maubima newspaper's coverage of human rights violations. President Rajapaksa also criticized the management and the journalists of Maubima newspaper during his press conference of 24 February.

It is now clear that these threats and allegations are not merely confined to words. A few days ago, there was an order to impound the passports of Mr. Tiran Alles and Mr. Dushyantha Basnayake. There also is a campaign underway to intimidate and harass the advertisers of Standard Newspapers. It may be the case that this campaign of intimidation against Standard Newspapers is carried out because President Rajapaksa misguidedly believes that Standard Newspapers is a vehicle for the politics of Mr. Mangala Samaraweera.

A few months ago, Maubima published an article critical of the President. There was an additional article that stated that a certain group in the United States was going to file a lawsuit against Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa for human rights violations. This was the beginning of the campaign of harassment against Maubima. Due to extreme pressure brought on our journalists, Maubima was forced to discontinue their defense and political columns. We were under pressure not to publish even articles that were already

published by other newspapers. There were special restrictions placed on our newspapers when it came to publishing stories on the irregularities and corruption in the Government. We had to think twice before writing any story that exposed corruption in any Ministry under President Rajapaksa. Most times we were forced to cancel such articles. Finally, even our coverage on the human rights abuses that were happening throughout Sri Lanka became an issue with the President. We were forced to curtail our reportage on these stories due to the harassment and death threats made on the management and journalists of our newspapers.

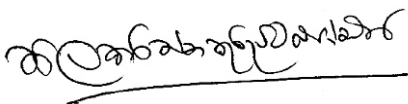
The first step in this intimidation campaign was an allegation against our newspapers that claimed we were supportive of the LTTE. We have amply proved that these allegations were baseless and untrue, on many previous occasions. Our newspapers are a platform where viewpoints of every ethnic and political group in Sri Lanka can be found. This conspiracy to harass and intimidate the Maubima newspaper is due to the fact that several powerful politicians dislike our independent viewpoints.

As part of this intimidation campaign, a Tamil journalist for our newspaper, Ms. Parameshwari Munuswamy, was arrested a few months ago under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and is languishing in prison without any charges being brought against her. Our journalists have been receiving death threats, which increased after the press conference by the President and the Defense Secretary on 24 February. We categorically state that the arrest of Mr. Dushyantha Basnayake and the plan to arrest Mr. Tiran Alles is a blatant attempt to silence the Maubima newspaper.

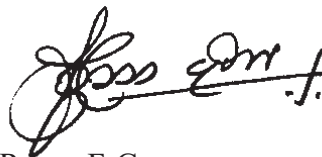
Under the unstable, volatile political climate that prevails in Sri Lanka, the defense apparatus has the right to detain and investigate any person they deem suspicious. We accept this fact. However, abusing the laws of the country and exploiting the PTA to harass and intimidate journalists who are critical of politicians is something that we thoroughly condemn. This cowardly attempt to intimidate and silence Maubima is a blatant abuse of power by politicians in high office.

This campaign of intimidation against Maubima newspaper is a reflection of the Government's attempt to suppress the media. The intimidation campaign that Maubima is facing today, is something that will most certainly be leveled against other newspapers and media organizations tomorrow. Therefore, we request every one to unite and help defeat the forces that are trying to suppress an independent media and the freedom of the press.

On behalf of Maubima,



Thilakaratne Kuruwita Bandara  
Chief Editor – Maubima



Ruvan F. Guruge  
Director Editorial Board – Maubima

**27 February 2007**