

Attacks on the media escalates in Sri Lanka: Six people - journalists and media workers in custody

Four Tamils and two Sinhalese working in the media field are being held by the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) of the Sri Lankan Police. V. Jesikaran, Vadivel Valarmathi, J.S. Tissanayagam, Kithsiri Wijesinghe, Udayanan, and A.G. Gayan Lasantha Ranga are all held in custody and are being interrogated. All contribute to producing the website www.outreachsl.com.

Chronology of events

On the night of March 6th, V. Jesikaran, owner of 'Outreach Multimedia' and 'E-Kwality Graphics', formerly a journalist for the Tamil newspaper 'Sarinihar' and his wife Vadivel Valarmathi were arrested by the TID in Colombo. He was arrested while he was working at his printing press and then they took him to his house where his wife too was arrested.

The next day (7th march), J.S. Tissanayagam and Kithsiri Wijesinghe went to the TID headquarters at Chaitya Road, Colombo to inquire about arrests. The TID took them into custody as well!! J.S. Tissanayagam is a respected Tamil journalist, who works as a free lance writer for the mass circulation English language newspapers 'The Sunday Times' and 'The Daily Mirror' is also the chief editor of the 'outreachsl' website (In 2002 he worked with D. Sivaram as the co-editor of the 'Northeastern Herald'). Kithsiri Wijesinghe is a Sinhala journalist with wide experience, having previously worked for the popular Sinhala weeklies 'Ravaya' and 'Mawbima' and is currently the features editor of the 'Diyesa' bi monthly magazine. He is a freelance worker for the 'outreachsl'.

Udayanan, was also arrested on 7th March while he was at home in Colombo. He is a professional video editor and did the video processing work at 'outreachsl'.

On 7th afternoon TID came looking for S. Sivakumar and as they could not find him took a cousin into custody! S. Sivakumar is the spokesman of the Free Media Movement (FMM), who had previously worked as the Chief Editor of various Tamil publications including widely read newspapers 'Advan', and 'Sarinihar'. Presently he works as the Editor of the bi-monthly Tamil language 'Sarinihar' magazine. The FMM was able to negotiate that Sivakumar would be produced at the TID office at 9am on 8th March – the cousin was released. S. Sivakumar presented himself to the TID and he was released 12 hours later.

As a response to a demand made by the TID to the FMM convener Sunanda Dashapriya, the camera-person of the outreachsl website A.G. Gayan Lasantha Ranga, a professional videographer who had worked for several other electronic media institutions previously, produced himself to the TID headquarters also on the 8th March. He has also now been detained at the TID.

The attack on Outreach – the context

These attacks have a resonance to the attacks on the mass circulation Sinhala weekly 'Mawbima' last year. Mawbima, which had been critical towards the government policies regarding the war and corruption,

came under attack in November 2006. Parameswary Munusamy, a female Tamil journalist worked as a translator attached to Mawbima, was arrested along with her roommate. They were detained at the same TID headquarters and were accused of being active LTTE members. Later the Financial director of the paper, Dusyantha Basnayaka and the owner of the paper Tiran Alles were also arrested under similar allegations by the TID. They were accused for publishing a newspaper with the financial backing from the LTTE. But when all these repressive measures did not work in silencing the voice of the paper, the government froze the bank accounts of the newspaper forcing the paper to shut down. After the paper was closed down, all of the arrested were released without a single charge being proven.

Now the same drama is being repeated against another media institution by the same TID. Outreach website which was started in January 2008 published many articles (and video clips) regarding the worsening human rights situation in Sri Lanka. Exactly in the same manner, the journalists and the owner of the Outreach website, has been arrested by the TID under the same accusation – “maintaining a website with the financial backing of the LTTE”. TID has a notorious history for targeting journalists who criticise the government’s human rights abuses, branding them as LTTE spies or sympathisers.

International dimension

The attack on the ‘outreachsl’ must be also seen in connection to the exposure of the terrible human rights situation in Sri Lanka by various international organisations – the Human Rights Watch Report being the most recent. The Sri Lankan government sees the destruction of local initiatives like outreachsl as a necessity. Recently, high-ranking government ministers and officials have openly stated that locally based websites are one of the main obstructions to the war effort. If these actions are successful it will be seen as a powerful signal to all those who dare to stand up to the government policies – specially in terms of the war. These arrests have already created a fear psychosis among those who are engaged in this field. Every individual and organisation is made to think – if I protest about the detention of the ‘Outreachsl’ people, will I be putting myself into danger too? They are thinking - if I am arrested how long will I be kept? What kind of torture will I have to undergo? Who will defend me?

International pressure is essential to alter this situation. We appeal to you to immediately put pressure on the Sri Lankan government to release all those who are being held.

Please send faxes to:

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (who is also the Minister of the Interior Defence)

Fax: 0094 11 232 1404

And to:

Mahinda Samarasinghe (Minister for Disaster Management And Human Rights)

Fax number: 0094 11 268 1980

Please do not forget to email a copy of the text that you have faxed to imrv@humanrights.de

Date: 10.03.08