

Sri Lanka media under threat

By Malladi Rama Rao - Syndicate Features

For Sri Lanka journalists, threats from the Tamil rebels and from the official machinery have become an every day reality. Kidnappings, threats to life and forced detentions are norm; they have to factor in, in their working life. While the government holds the LTTE and its breakaway factions responsible for the threats to media freedom, a section of the local media holds the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) as equally guilty.

Journalist of the Maubima news paper, Parameshwari, was forced to part with her ID card and passport by an armed group 'dressed in casual clothes' in broad day light in Colombo in early June. She recognized one member of the gang. "He was part of the group that had forcibly abducted and detained me in April". Last November, Parameshwari was taken into custody for interrogation by the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) for "aiding and abetting" LTTE activists. She was released after about 90 days following a court order. The hunch is that those involved in the seizure of Parameshwari's identification documents could be from the Criminal Investigation Department.

Three Sinhalese journalists, Lalith Seneviratne, Sisira Priyankara and Nihal Senasinghe of "Akuna" which is the official paper of a railway trade union, faced music at the hands of the security forces in February. The case hoisted on them was that they had visited the LTTE controlled areas and were involved in smuggling arms to Colombo.

A break away Tamil rebel group has held out death threats to two senior journalists early June for 'criticising' its activities. Karuna group has sent letters warning Asian Tribune editor K T Rajasingham and put on notice the staff of Daily Mirror. Both Asian Tribune and Daily Mirror have earned the 'wrath' of V.Muralitharan alias Karuna Amman, who heads the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) for their coverage of the split in the group, which took place on May 4.

"Karuna will not tolerate any adverse comments and he will see that you are removed from the face of this earth", the letter bluntly conveyed to Rajasingham, who publishes the "Asian Tribune". Rajasingham had his journalistic baptism in Jaffna some forty years back. His contemporary and a one time friend was Anton Silvester Balasingham who went on to become the LTTE ideologue.

"KT" as Rajasingham is known in journalistic circles and Tigers's supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran belong to two adjacent Vadamardchchy villages. Ideologically, they are poles apart. KT faced trouble at the hands of Tigers several times over the years even when he lived in Chennai in the eighties.

Whether it is because of this past or otherwise, "Asian Tribune" is pronouncedly anti-LTTE. It is also generally sympathetic towards Karuna, who has emerged as a strong warlord in the Eastern Sri Lanka after breaking away from Tiger supremo Prabhakaran. He is believed to enjoy patronage of President Mahinda Rajapakse notwithstanding official denials.

The tilt towards Karuna has not come in the way of "Asian Tribune" 'exposing' the fratricidal killings let loose by Karuna after his aide Pillaiyan engineered a split in the group. It also carried a campaign against child-soldiers in the Karuna-fold. The daily put the spotlight on the presence of more than 190 child-soldiers and more recruitment from Amparai district.

It was alleged that Karuna has telephonically threatened Champika Liyanaraachchi, editor of Daily Mirror from Colombo, but she has since told "Asian Tribune" that there was no such threat. Karuna group also warned the staff of "Mirror" that they would send killer squad to eliminate any journalist 'who reports adversely' against his group.

Take the case of freelance journalist, Sampath Lakmal Silva. Though his abduction and killing took place a little while ago, the very mention of the case sends chill down the spine of journalists. The 24-year-old Lakmal worked with the Lakbima newspaper, TNL television and Sathdina newspaper. He wrote extensively on defence matters. One night, he left home, according to his mother, 'to meet Kumar Sir', who had telephoned him. His body was found next day morning. One surmise is that Sampath was bumped off 'suspecting' him to be an informer to the government. But who 'eliminated' him and for what purpose remains a mystery.

Convenor of the Free Media Movement, Sunanda Deshapriya, says such killings at a time of the country is sliding towards war could pose a serious threat to independent journalists. As many as four journalists were assassinated in less than two years but those responsible are yet to be brought to book, Sunanda laments.

Any observer of Sri Lanka will agree that journalists whether they are from the majority Sinhala community or minority Tamils have been at the

receiving end over several years. The list is long. It includes editors, journalists, freelancer writers, independent journalists, and even radio announcers and photographers. It is not a sudden phenomenon though it has become pronounced now and has thus attracted the notice of various human rights organisations.

Two leading media houses, Wijaya Newspapers and the Sirasa Media network have earned the wrath of pro-Sinhala groups and parties like JVP. Lankadeepa from the Wijaya is the biggest circulated Sinhala daily. Sirasa TV has won laurels for its TV coverage. Yet, the JVP publicity secretary, Wimal Weerawansa considers that both media groups 'represent' the interest of the LTTE. His advice to employees of these organizations: better find alternate employment.

Why is Weerawansa angry? It is possible that he is peeved at the lampooning he was subjected in the Lankadeepa. Cartoonist, Dasa Hapuwalana, takes delight at poking fun at the JVP leader. Not surprisingly, Weerawansa spews venom at Dasa.

Politicians in a democracy must learn to live with media criticism. They also must learn to enjoy a cartoon. Politics become dull and drab if caricaturists either go out of job or retirement. And we will be deprived of our daily dose of hearty laugh. Well, a sense of humour and an ability to laugh at one self figures prominently on the CV of most successful politicians.

For an Indian journalist, who lives and works in the safe environs of Delhi, it is difficult to imagine how journalists manage to keep to their daily deadlines in Colombo. The plight of ethnic Tamil journalist in strife torn Jaffna is something very difficult even to visualize. Not many of the tribe is left behind there, going by reports. And their number is dwindling by the day.

Selvarajah Rajivarnam, a young reporter with the daily Uthayan, one of the Tamil newspapers that has been most targeted by violence, was gunned down near his office on April 30 in the government controlled Jaffna area. 25-year-old Rajivarnam is the second journalist to be killed in April. Though he was in the profession for over four years, he was literally a student as he had been taking an evening journalism course at Jaffna University. Rajivarnam worked for three years for the newspaper Namathu Eelanadu (Our Eelam Nation), and for the daily, Yarl Thinakural.

Eelanadu's managing editor, Sinnathamby Sivamaharajah, was murdered in August 2006. Thinakural's scribe, Subramaniam Ramachandran, is missing since February. It is no surprise, therefore, that many Tamil publications are printed in Colombo and distributed in the Tamil heartland.

Of late, the long arm of LTTE Tigers is reaching Colombo with some effortless ease. And it is cause for concern, undoubtedly! The clamp down on the web based Tamilnet (from London) is not the answer to the problem. But that is what the authorities in Colombo did this past week saying it is "widely considered to be biased towards the LTTE". The charge may be true to an extent but the fact is the news web site offered "alternative perspectives, insights and information". Its editor, Sivaram Dharmaratnam, was killed in April 2005.

The ban on Tamilnet clearly highlights, as the Free Media Movement (FMM) observers, the extent to which media is censored and the free flow of information curtailed in Sri Lanka.

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3 hours 35 min agoDear Ramani
4 hours 7 min agoWhenever the LTTE terrorists
4 hours 21 min agoThank you, Liliput on Sun,
4 hours 24 min agoNow Scotland yard has
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