

Sri Lanka journalists protest against repression

Published on 30/01/07 at 13:46:30 CET by chinaworker.org

Hundreds of journalists and media workers from five Sri Lankan media organisations staged a joint protest at Colombo Fort railway station last Tuesday, 23 January, against the threats and intimidation against journalists and their frequent abduction, arrest and murder.

A Colombo journalist reports

Sunantha Deshappriya, the coordinator of the Free Media Movement (FMM) said: "The media in Sri Lanka faces a harsh future as it attempts to provide the correct and true information to the public in a hostile environment."

The outrages have continued despite repeated requests to the government and the president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, to stop the violent harassment of the media. Against the background of increasingly savage and oppressive government measures, trade union activities have also been curtailed and workers' protests in Colombo have been forcibly dispersed, including with police and military assaults. On 9 January a workers' protest at the Colombo Transport Board headquarters, with MPs and other figures present, was violently broken up. This was the same day that the United People's Movement public rally in Nugegoda was attacked and disrupted by an underworld gang led by Deputy Minister Mervyn Silva (see previous material on socialistworld.net).

Journalists attacked

Last week, this same deputy minister walked past the media workers' protest at the Fort station with about a hundred goons to stage a counter picket. Under the slogan 'Journalists should tell the truth!' he was trying to pretend that reports of his own behaviour, including at Nugegoda, were untrue. Two busloads of people were brought to the scene shouting out against the media and in support of the Armed Forces!

As has been previously reported, three journalists were badly beaten up by Mervyn's thugs at Nugegoda as a warning not to report the violence carried out against a democratic anti-war gathering. A recent report publicised in the press here says no less than eight journalists have been killed in the past year in Sri Lanka.

During the past month alone, there have been ten serious incidents against media personnel. They include the questioning by the Criminal Investigation Department of three journalists on the government-owned 'Sunday Observer' and the Sinhala Sunday paper, 'Silumina', under the recently re-introduced Prevention of Terrorism regulations, the extended arrest of a young female Tamil journalist of a weekly Sinhala broadsheet, 'Maubima' and an assault on the news editor of the 'Derana' TV channel. Three other press people, including a senior Reuters photographer and the president of the Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance, have left the country after receiving death threats.

Unbearable restrictions

With the blockades and restrictions on goods supplied to the North, Tamil newspapers based in the Jaffna peninsula are suffering a severe shortage of newsprint and will soon disappear from the shelves. Paramilitary groups working in tandem with government security forces in the East have banned all Colombo-based Tamil newspapers from being sold there. Such is the threat on the fundamental right of the people to have information and the right of expression, under the present regime of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. All this comes in the wake of a severe erosion of democratic rights in the whole country, a break-down of law and order and a hyped up war frenzy in support of the escalation of war and violent action being taken against all peace initiatives. The incidents of abductions, involuntary disappearances, extra-judicial killings and heavy extortions from Tamil businessmen in Colombo has continued to rise, now reaching over 80.

Solidarity needed

The Rajapaksa regime is stepping up its campaign against all democratic rights and against trade unions, the media, democratic and civil organisations that tend to challenge the failure of the government to deliver its promise of better standards of living, efficient and decent governance and an 'honourable' peace. In its desperate bid to survive, the Executive Presidency is propping itself up with repressive regulations, coercion of smaller representative political parties to fall in line with the government and with goon squads led by men like Deputy Minister Silva. With the main opposition parties also buckling under the pressure of such political manipulations, the working class and other democratic forces urgently need the support of the international democratic forces in their bid to halt the march to anarchy and totalitarian rule in Sri Lanka. We appeal for this situation to be publicised as widely as possible, including amongst journalists world-wide