

Violence against media in the Eastern Province seriously undermines democracy

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22 October 2008, Colombo, Sri Lanka: Recent violence directed against and involving media personnel in the Eastern Province ridicule the Sri Lankan Government's claims of the restoration of democracy and the rule of law in the region.

In August, a TMVP (Karuna faction) supporter/member threatened journalist Thakshila Jayasena from Sandeshaya – the BBC Sinhala Service - when covering a protest campaign by the United National Party, Sri Lanka's main opposition party.

In September, journalist Radhika Devakumar, a provincial correspondent of the Thinakaran newspaper, a Tamil daily, survived an assassination attempt in her home during which she received three gunshot wounds. Radhika served as the media coordinator for Eastern Province Chief Minister Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan alias Pillayan for a short period.

Last week, tension prevailed in Batticaloa as armed cadre of Karuna and Pillayan factions violently clashed over the ownership of the Thamil Alai newspaper. As noted by the BBC,

"It initially belonged to Vinayagamurthy Muralitharan (Karuna) but the ownership was taken over by group led by Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (Pillayan) after Karuna left Sri Lanka, police said. Armed members of the Karuna faction have taken over the newspaper office in Govindan road, Batticaloa."

Thamil Alai is published using equipment stolen from the offices of the Thinakkathir in August 2002, at a time when Karuna was the top leader of the LTTE in the region. As we noted in a press release on 8 August 2002 that was also sent to LTTE, the Thinakkathir office was "vandalised and office equipment (computers, printers, TV, radios, UPS's etc) worth Rs. 1.2 million stolen during the attack."

A history of violence in general, and against media in particular, by both Karuna and Pillayan continues unchecked to date, first under the protection of the LTTE and now under the protection of the Government. Both regimes are opposed to the freedom of expression and media freedom. It is unlikely that the transition from one to the other will result in stronger independent media in the region.

The inability and unwillingness of armed Karuna and Pillayan factions to resolve disputes non-violently and abide by the rule of law showcases the fragility of democratic governance in the region. This raises serious concerns for the safety and security of independent journalists in the region.

A region that has for decades suffered the brunt of the LTTE's violent suppression of dissent does not need two armed factions violently pursuing their parochial ends. Journalists, caught in cross-fire and actively targeted, will continue to suffer the brunt of this lip-service to democracy, at a time when the Government is also unwilling and unable to check unprecedented levels of violence against independence media.

The IATAJ unequivocally condemns all forms of violence against media by armed groups. We urgently call upon all armed factions in the Eastern Province to give up violence and work towards the restoration of democratic governance, a strong, critical media and the rule of law.