

“Shocking Violations” of Journalists’ Rights Continue in Sri Lanka

Says IFJ’s President Christopher Warren. Wed. 06.12.2006

Military personnel yesterday took into custody two journalists. Last week a photo editor was reortedly assaulted by police.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) is disturbed by Sri Lankan journalists’ continued suffering at the hands of authorities, after two journalists were detained by the military and police assaulted a photojournalist, while another journalist remains in detention under anti-terrorist legislation.

“The situation in Sri Lanka continues to deteriorate with these latest press freedom abuses at the hands of authorities, further highlighting the vital need for the Sri Lankan government to intervene and ensure journalists’ rights are protected,” the IFJ President Christopher Warren said.

According to an IFJ affiliate, the Free Media Movement (FMM), two journalists from the weekly *Sathdina Sinhala* were taken into custody on November 5 by military personnel, while meeting with union leaders of Sri Lanka Telecom HQ, which is situated in a high security zone.

The FMM reports that the military delivered the journalists, Saman Janaka and Jayasiri Wikramasingha, to a police station where police questioned them for five hours, stripped their camera of film and confiscated photos of a picketing campaign by Telecom employees.

The pair were reportedly only released after their editor, Sri Lal Priyantha, made verbal assurances.

A week earlier, Asoka Fernando, the deputy photo editor of *The Sunday Leader*, was assaulted and had his camera smashed by police officers at a temple in Pannipitiya on November 28.

The FMM reported that Fernando sustained minor injuries and was detained until the following afternoon by the Maharagama police, on the outskirts of Colombo, after facing Gangodawila magistrate’s court on a criminal charge.

The FMM said that Fernando photographed clashes between police and civilians inside the temple before police turned on him, beating him and smashing his digital camera, valued at approximately US \$1848.

“It is a disgraceful situation when a photojournalist is not only prevented from doing his job, but also is physically assaulted by police who are supposed to be there to maintain order,” the IFJ President said.

Meanwhile, detention continues for Parameswari Maunasámi, writer for the weekly *Mawbima*, who was arrested at her home south of Colombo on November 24, according to the FMM.

Local sources said she is being held under anti-terrorist legislation that allows for prolonged detention without charge, and authorities have given no reason for her arrest.

According to local reports, Maunasámi may have been arrested for her work at the paper covering the separatist conflict between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam rebels.

"Considering Sri Lanka's recent history of Tamil journalists being unfairly targeted, the IFJ calls for authorities to fully explain their detention of Maunasámi and to expedite their inquiries or release her immediately," Warren said.

"It is a deeply concerning sign of a new low in Sri Lanka, where members of the police force and military are using their powers to control and dominate journalists, instead of fulfilling their duty to uphold and protect a free and independent media," the IFJ president said.

"The IFJ again calls on the government of Sri Lanka to take swift action to send a message to all parties that the rights and safety of journalists must be respected at all times," Warren said.