

Mr Mahinda Rajapaksa
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Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka
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March 27, 2008

Dear President Mahinda Rajapaksa,

RE: Stop the War on Journalists in Sri Lanka

The international press freedom and human rights community is extremely concerned that journalists and media workers in Sri Lanka are daily confronting grave threats to the safety of themselves and their families.

As a result of our concerns and common interest in defending the rights of journalists and others across the world and in Sri Lanka, we have joined forces in an international campaign to Stop the War on Journalists in Sri Lanka.

To all intents and purposes, the failure of Sri Lanka's security personnel to act to prevent threats and attacks on journalists and media workers and to bring those responsible to account indicates that the State has relinquished its role as keeper of the peace.

We respectfully request that, as President of the Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka, you take urgent action to remedy this appalling situation and direct your Government and the police to abide by Sri Lanka's commitments to uphold the human rights of journalists in accordance with international law.

In particular, we request that the Government of Sri Lanka fulfill its obligations as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to uphold and respect the right to freedom of expression for all people, including journalists, as stipulated under Article 19 and to refrain from deliberate attacks that endanger journalists' lives.

We request also that the Government of Sri Lanka enforce the United Nations Security Council Resolution to Protect Journalists Reporting in War Zones and Crisis Areas, adopted by the Security Council in 2006. The resolution stipulates: "... that all parties to an armed conflict comply fully with the obligations applicable to them under international law related to the protection of civilians in armed conflict, including journalists, media professionals and associated personnel."

You will be aware that Sri Lanka has the unenviable reputation as one of the most dangerous places for journalists in Asia-Pacific. Six journalists and media workers were killed in 2007 and very many others were - and continue to be - threatened and assaulted. Twenty-five journalists from Jaffna have been forced to flee the country. Others are in

hiding due to threats on their lives and the failure of the Government and authorities to assure them of protection and to investigate their tormentors. The families of threatened journalists are also at great risk.

We are extremely disturbed that senior members of Sri Lanka's Government and security personnel have made inflammatory comments condemning journalists as traitors, implicitly allowing for the incitement of violence against journalists and media institutions.

In addition, Government Minister Mervyn Silva is allegedly linked to continuing threats and attacks against people who witnessed or reported on an incident at the office of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) in late December.

The physical and psychological violence confronting journalists and their families cannot be denied. Cases reported so far in 2008 include the following:

- **January:** Chevaan Daniel, Kingsley Ratnayaka and Susil Kedelpitya, of MBC TV and Radio network, received death threats, linked to coverage of SLRC incident.
- **January:** SLWJA president Sanath Balasooriya and FMETU general secretary Dharmasiri Lankapeli, among others, threatened in relation to SLRC incident.
- **January 7:** Social Services and Social Welfare Minister K.N. Douglas Devananda calls Shakti TV *Minnal* presenter Sri Ranga Jeyarathnam a terrorist and traitor.
- **January 7:** *Silumina* senior journalist and SLWJA secretary Poddala Jayantha suffers attempted abduction at his home by an unknown gang.
- **January 16:** Sirasa TV correspondent U.S.A. Bandara threatened by a ruling party politician and a village officer while covering an explosion in south-west Sri Lanka.
- **January 23:** SLRC news producer Lal Hemantha Mawalage's vehicle intentionally hit by another car.
- **January 23:** Freelance television journalist Aravinda Sri Nissanka arrested in Ratmalana as he filmed pedestrians crossing the road without using traffic lights.
- **January 25:** Lal Hemantha Mawalage attacked with a knife by two unidentified men on his way home in Athurigiriya.
- **January 28:** Thinakarn daily journalist Suhaib M. Kasim stabbed by five intruders at his home in Colombo.
- **January 29:** Two armed assailants threatened the mother of SLRC media worker Duleep Dushantha with death.
- **February:** Sirasa TV news director Susil Kedelpitiya reports being followed by suspicious figures.
- **February 12:** Gemnu Amarasinghe, Associated Press photojournalist, arrested while covering the re-opening of a college in Colombo.
- **February 12:** Eight journalists held in custody in Galle for two hours for covering an unruly incident in a Southern Provincial Council meeting.
- **February 12:** Muslim journalists M.S.M. Noordeen and S.M.M. Mustafa verbally abused by police and denied entry to the Government Secretariat in Batticaloa.
- **February 23:** Derana TV news producer Sugath Dharmapriya abused and assaulted by a senior police officer while reporting on a bomb blast in Colombo.
- **February 27:** SLRC assistant director of news camera Priyal Ranjith Perera threatened at home by a gang of four who attempted to attack him with a knife.
- **March 4:** Lal Hemantha Mawalage threatened by an unidentified person who told him to get his coffin ready.
- **March 5:** SLRC librarian Ranjani Aluthge stabbed in the back and shoulder while travelling on a bus.

- **March 6-8:** Seven journalists and media workers from www.outreachsl.com taken in for questioning by Terrorist Investigations Department and not permitted to notify their families of their whereabouts. J.S. Tissainayagam, editor, and N. Jasiharan, of E-Kwality Printers, remain in custody as of March 20.
- **March 10:** Journalist Vincent Jeyam arrested and kept in custody for 12 hours in Wellawatta police station.
- **March 14:** SLRC journalist Anurasiri Hettige beaten with an iron rod by an unidentified gang.
- **March 14:** The father and sister of journalist Munusami Parameshwari seriously injured at home by armed intruders. The group warned that Parameshwari would risk death if she returned to Gampola. Parameshwari remains in hiding.
- **March 16:** Home of journalists Sunethra Athugalpura and Sashi Kumara ransacked by unknown people. Nothing stolen, incident regarded as intimidation.
- **March 19:** Minster Silva verbally attacked SLWJA general secretary Poddala Jayantha and the owners of Sirasa TV.

In not one case of attack or threat have the police taken action to bring offenders to account, in accordance with due legal process.

We respectfully request that the Government of Sri Lanka take urgent action to end the culture of impunity confronting journalists and media workers in Sri Lanka.

We welcome reports of your personal pledge to representatives of journalists at a meeting on March 17, 2008, that the SLRC-related attacks will be investigated and action will be taken to prevent further attacks.

However, the appointment on March 20 of a recently retired general, Sunil Silva, as Additional Deputy Director General, Administration at SLRC does not in any way allay our concerns for SLRC staff and media freedom in Sri Lanka.

We strongly urge that you extend your commitment to protect all journalists and media workers in Sri Lanka and take action to ensure freedom of expression is not curtailed, officially or unofficially. We call on you to act on this commitment by immediately (i) directing members of the Government and security forces to show their respect for the rights of journalists and to desist from making derogatory and libellous comments targeting the media, and (ii) directing the Sri Lankan Police to investigate seriously all attacks and threats against journalists and to follow due process in bringing perpetrators to account.

Free expression and a strong, independent and critical media are fundamental hallmarks of a successful democracy. We strongly believe that press freedom must be respected and upheld by all parties in order for democracy to prevail in Sri Lanka.

We respectfully ask that as the President of Sri Lanka, you acknowledge and act on the concerns expressed here by a wide range of international and local organisations dedicated to defending a free media, free expression and the human rights of all peoples.

Yours Respectfully,

Signed by:

Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA)
Algerian Centre for the Defence and Promotion of Press Freedom (CALP)
Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Indonesia

American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA)
Association of Taiwan Journalists (ATJ)
Azerbaijan Journalists Trade Union (JuHI)
Bahrain Center for Human Rights
Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ)
Cambodian Association for the Protection of Journalists (CAPJ)
Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)
Cartoonists Rights Network, International (CRNI)
Center for Human Rights and Democratic Studies (CEHURDES), Nepal
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
Federation of Media Employees Trade Union (FMETU), Sri Lanka
Free Media Movement (FMM)
Freedom House
Greek Helsinki Monitoring
Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA)
Independent Journalism Center, Moldova
Indian Media Centre
Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, Azerbaijan
Institute of Mass Information (IMI) Ukraine
International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)
International Movement Against all forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR)
Asia Committee
Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate
Media Institute, Kenya
Media Rights Agenda (MRA), Nigeria
Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA)
National Union of Journalists, India (NUJ(I))
National Union of Journalists, United Kingdom (NUJ)
National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ)
Observatoire pour la liberté de press, d'édition et de création (OLPEC), Tunisie
Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ)
Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF)
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF)
Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance (SLTMA)
Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA)
South East Asia Press Alliance (SEAPA)
Tamil Information Centre
Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA,
Union of Cyprus Journalists
Walkley Foundation
World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC)
World Press Freedom Committee (WPFC)