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Weekly paper executive arrested under anti-terror law



Reporters Without Borders has condemned the Sri Lankan security forces' improper use of the law to arrest people working for the media.

Dushantha Basnayake, financial director of Standard Newspapers Private Limited (SNPL), which publishes the Sinhalese-language weekly *Mawbima*, was arrested in the capital Colombo on 26 February 2007.

Officers of the Terrorist investigation Division (TID) went to Basnayake's office at around 6pm on 26 February questioning him. After four hours of interrogation, the officers apparently received a call from a defence ministry official ordering them to put him under arrest.

Dushantha Basnayake, aged 40 and the father of two children, is Sinhalese. The weekly *Mawbima* has a reputation for criticising the government and for condemning human rights abuses and corruption in Sri Lanka.

It is the second time that the government has acted against the weekly. Young Tamil journalist Munusamy Parameshawary, has been held by the TID under the anti-terror law since November 2006.

Despite threats and repeated visits from tax inspectors, the newspaper has not changed its editorial line.

"The anti-terrorism laws are designed for the arrest of terrorists, not journalists or opposition leaders," said a spokeswoman for the worldwide press freedom organisation. The arrest of Dushantha Basnayake, who is close to the newspaper's editor, looks like retaliation.

"The fears of human rights organisations have unfortunately turned out to be well-founded: The anti-terror law is being misused to silence critics. We call on the Sri Lankan government to release Dushantha Basnayake", it concluded.

On 24 February 2007, President Rajapakse and his brother Gotabaya Rajapakse, the Defence Secretary, used state TV channels to put out a programme in which they accused *Mawbima*, as well as its owner Tiran Alles, of being a spokesman for the Tamil Tigers. The head of state and his entourage have also accused Sripathi Sooyaracchi and Mangala Samaraweera, linked with Tiran Alles, of using the news programme to spread lies against him. The two former ministers were recently sacked from the government for having committed human rights violations.

Reporters Without Borders defends imprisoned journalists and press freedom throughout the world. It has nine national sections (Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland). It has representatives in Bangkok, London, New York, Tokyo and Washington. And it has more than 120 correspondents in 100 countries.

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