

Fact Sheet



Sri Lanka Brief Fact Sheet No 1 – 1 September 2014

SRI LANKA: VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MARCH – AUGUST 2014

Throughout the period covered by this factsheet, violations of the right to freedom of expression and more generally the rights of the people of Sri Lanka continued with impunity. The state, the police, the military, extremist Buddhist groups and various mobs overtly or covertly backed by the authorities were the main perpetrators of these violations. The forms of violations included censorship, detention, assault, death threats, verbal as well as physical attacks and silencing by cooptation. The domestic mechanisms, like the Attorney General's department, the Judiciary and

the National Human Rights Commission, have been politicised to such an extent that they are either unwilling or unable to investigate and take remedial action. In this context, self-censorship has become the norm. The people's right to information continues to suffer.

This factsheet in its totality provides a comprehensive picture of suppression of freedom of expression in Sri Lanka today. The ramifications of the resultant self-censorship needs to be dealt with separately.

THE UNHRC RESOLUTION ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN SRI LANKA

Expressing serious concern at the continuing reports of violations of human rights in Sri Lanka, violations of freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, threats to judicial independence and the rule of law, as well as intimidation of and reprisals against human rights defenders, members of civil society, lawyers and journalists, urges the Government of Sri Lanka to investigate all alleged attacks, by individuals and groups, on journalists and human rights defenders. The Government is also urged to hold perpetrators of such attacks accountable and to take steps to prevent such attacks in the future;

Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka, UNHRC Resolution, A/HRC/25/L.1/Rev.1

LIST OF INCIDENTS

CENSORSHIP

March 19, 2014:

Two Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) Remain Gagged Since March

The two HRDs, Mr Ruki Fernando, of INFORM, Colombo and Rev Fr Praveen Mahesan, a Catholic Priest from Jaffna, who were arrested on 16th March, remain gagged. After their release on 19th March, the TID obtained fresh court orders prohibiting the pair from talking to anyone about the case. A third court order compelled them to handover their iPads and a hard disk. A fresh case was filed against them by the TID. Banning orders remain to date.

- INFORM: Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka; January - March 2014 at <http://goo.gl/JZzWMI>

April 07, 2014:

Journalist Dismissed Over a Satirical Picture Caption

The Lakbima newspaper management dismissed Mr Sujith Prasanga, a sub-editor of the newspaper, for writing a satirical picture caption to a photograph of the wife of Secretary to the Ministry of Defense (also the brother of the President), Mr Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

- www.lankanewsweb.net at <http://goo.gl/sot7ew>

May 10, 2014:

Press Conference Banned

Sri Lankan Minister of Youth Affairs banned a press conference by delegates to the World Conference on Youth (WCY) on the abduction of nearly 300 school girls by Boko Haram militants in Nigeria. "These people have a different agenda in mind," the Minister is reported to have told the media.

- www.ceylontoday.lk at <http://goo.gl/CZHvvl>

April 11, 2014:

New Censorship Proposed for Tamil Press

In an interview given to a Sri Lankan newspaper Dr Rohan Gunarathna, a frequent resource person at the Sri Lanka Ministry of Defense, proposed to hold the editors of Tamil newspapers accountable for publishing disinformation and misinformation. He argued that, to prevent propaganda of LTTE proxies, such a practice was necessary.

- www.nation.lk at <http://goo.gl/4BZajv>



The struggle for media freedom continues in Jaffna on 1 August 2014. Source. TamilNet

April 18, 2014:

Visa Extension Refused to a Foreign Correspondent

The government refused to extend the working visa for the BBC correspondent in Colombo, Mr Charles Haviland. Mr Haviland had been in Sri Lanka since April 2009 and has reported extensively on human rights and post-war issues in the country.

- www.colombogazette.com at <http://goo.gl/mwloHZ>

May 12, 2014:

Website Blocked

Access to the website www.srilankamirror.lk was blocked by all the Internet Service Providing (ISP) companies in Sri Lanka. The editor Mr Shivantha had been informed by the local ISP companies that the blocking was done upon the recommendation of the Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka. The site remains blocked.

- www.theindependent.lk at <http://goo.gl/F8X3ov> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)

May 18, 2014:

Remembrance Banned

In the 3rd week of May, the military banned all temple events and public gatherings to commemorate the dead, stating that no bells should toll on 17th and 18th May 2014. On 18th May 2014, military spokesman Mr Ruwan Wanigasuriya told the media that no public remembrance events would be allowed.

- www.globaltamilnews.net at <http://goo.gl/kiX9oH>

April 19, 2014:

Press Conference Disrupted, Abusive Language Used

A mob led by Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) disrupted the inaugural press conference of the Jathika Bala Sen led by Venerable Watareka Vijitha Thero. The BBS monks threatened, intimidated and almost assaulted Vijitha Thero and shouted at a Muslim cleric to shut up. The police officers present did not attempt to stop the invasion and disruption or the threats and vilifications by the BBS.

- www.groundviews.org at <http://goo.gl/oBZB87>

May 19, 2014:

Newspaper offices blocked by the military

The offices of two Jaffna dailies, the Uthayan and the Yal Thinakkural, were blocked by the military. People who entered the Uthyan newspaper were questioned and some people were turned away. The office of another Tamil daily, the Yal Thinakkural, situated in Jaffna, also was blocked by the military. 19th May is commemorated as war remembrance day by the Sri Lankan Tamils.

- www.dailymirror.lk at <http://goo.gl/PKPOng>
- www.globaltamilnews.net at <http://goo.gl/cQRbO9>

May 20, 2014:

Website Blocked

The website www.theindependent.lk was blocked by all local Internet Service Providers (ISP) in the country. The trilingual website (Sinhala, English and Tamil) is run by Independent Media Networks (pvt) Ltd. The site remains blocked.

- www.srilankamirror.com at <http://goo.gl/EyiNBT> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)

May 28, 2014:

Police Banned the Covering of Court Proceedings

The police did not allow media to cover the cross examination of Defense Secretary, Mr Gotabaya Rajapaksa, by Attorney-at-law, Mr M.A. Sumanthiran, in a defamation case filed by him. A high ranking police officer threatened media personnel that if they dared to film Mr Rajapaksa's motorcade they would have to be in detention for months or years.

- www.bbc.co.uk at <http://goo.gl/CRerpe>

May 28, 2014:

Film Cut-out of Opposition Removed

Police removed the large cut-outs of the film Ranja in which opposition parliamentarian Mr Ranjan Ramanayake plays the main role. The police wanted to erase the words "exposes the enthronement of injustice and the lawless Kings" from the cut-outs if they were to be displayed.

- www.lankanews.com at <http://goo.gl/YMpz5Y> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)

July 01, 2014:

NGOs Banned from Media Related Activities

The NGO Secretariat under the Defense Ministry sent a circular banning activist groups and NGOs from holding press conferences, issuing press releases and organizing trainings for journalists. Following the circular, the Finance and Planning Ministry informed all Non-Governmental Organisations that they should receive prior approval from the Ministry prior to obtaining foreign funds.

- www.srilankamirror.com at <http://goo.gl/t3VVjb>
- www.scoop.co.nz at <http://goo.gl/uxaMDI>

June 15, 2014:

Government Sent Censorship Letters to Media

Leader of the opposition, Mr R Ranil Wickremasinghe, stated that a censoring letter had been sent to every media organization following the Aluthgama and Beruwala communal violence which took place on 15th and 16th June. The letter had allegedly instructed the media organizations to do as told or to suffer the consequences, such as legal action, and with regard to electronic media, revoking of licenses, Mr Ranil Wickremasinghe stated.

- www.adaderana.lk at <http://goo.gl/EUdoo8>

July 15, 2014:

Fishermen March Banned in Jaffna

The police obtained a court order to ban the peaceful protest march organized by the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) in Jaffna. The police had obtained a court order saying that the march might cause disturbances to the general public.

- www.lankasrinews.com at <http://goo.gl/twFJUj>

July 25, 2014:

Military Blocked the Coverage of a Gang Rape Case

Sri Lankan military personnel threatened and evicted journalists from the court room where the inquiry into the gang rape of two Tamil school girls in Karainagar in the Northern Province, allegedly committed by Sri Lankan Navy personnel, was taking place. Dressed in civilian clothes, the military officers had confiscated cameras and mobile phones from the journalists and deleted any photographs which had been taken. The media personnel were told not to publish news related to the incidents.

- www.tamilguardian.com at <http://goo.gl/cv94F4>

August 24, 2014:

NYT Correspondent Refused Visa

South Asia Correspondent for The New York Times, Mr Gardiner Harris, was refused an entry visa by the government of Sri Lanka stating that the time is not conducive to approve his visit. State controlled Ceylon Daily News questioned "why would any government want to grant a visa to a man who is an inveterate professional liar?"

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/62poBY>

DEATH THREATS

April 10, 2014:

Editor Received a Death Threat in Mannar

A group led by a ruling party politician issued a death threat to Mr S.V. Sivakaran, editor of the Puthiyavan newspaper in Mannar. The group threatened to block the distribution of the newspaper and to set fire to the office.

- www.tamilnet.com at <http://goo.gl/zWiZpK> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)

May 18, 2014:

Death Threats to Journalists

Open death threats were issued against selected members of the teaching staff of the University of Jaffna, student leaders and journalists, over their attempts to remember the war dead. Posters headlined "last warning" by the "Troops to Safe Guard Motherland" were pasted in the Jaffna university compound on 18th May.

- www.tamilguardian.com at <http://goo.gl/N4z2uX>

June 15, 2014:

Journalists Assaulted and Threatened with Death

Mr Sarath Siriwardana, a journalist of the Sunday Times and Lankadeepa newspapers, was seriously assaulted and threatened with death by the angry mobs while he was covering the communal violence in Aluthgama. He was hospitalised for treatments later. A local reporter working for the BBC Sandeshaya was pushed by a mob and threatened not to cover the communal violence.

- www.sundaytimes.lk at <http://goo.gl/7KiRbG>

June 16, 2014:

Death Threats to a Leading Critic

Dr Nirmal Ranjith Devasiri, Former President of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) and a public critique of the government, was threatened with death on 16th June. Dr Devasiri's wife also has been threatened and in a telephone call received on the morning of 17th June caller has threatened that their daughter would be subjected to an acid attack.

- www.lankatruth.com at <http://goo.gl/HULXOz>

DETENTION

July 26, 2014:

FMM Convener Threatened with Death

Mr Sunil Jayasekara, the convener of the Free Media Movement, was threatened with death for coordinating a press conference against the disruption of a work shop scheduled to be held in Colombo for Tamil journalists of the North. Mr Jayasekara received at least seven phone calls threatening him with death even after the press conference was over.

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/zxhXor> & <http://goo.gl/Cmyegh>

August 04, 2014:

Vavuniya Journalist Threatened with Death

Death threats were issued via telephone to a journalist in Vavuniya, Mr Navarathinam Kapilanath. "You do not know us. Do you not wish to live after complaining about us to the police," the anonymous caller told Kapilanath.

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/CoYDwX>

March 13, 2014:

Arrest of a HRD for Speaking Up for Justice

On 13th March, Ms Balendran Jeyakumari, was arrested at her house in the Kilinochchi district, Northern Sri Lanka, by the Terrorist Investigation Department (TID) of the police. She had been a strong voice for justice of war victims, participating in campaigns to find out truth about disappeared persons, including her son. She still remains in detention at the Boosa Detention Centre without trial.

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/pLmbpo>

ASSAULTS

April 17, 2014:

Journalist Assaulted in Jaffna

A Tamil freelance journalist, Mr Sivagnanam Selvatheepan, a correspondent of Tamil Daily newspapers Veerakesaree and Thinakkural, published in Colombo, was attacked on 14th April in Vadamarachi, in the Northern Jaffna district. Seriously injured Mr Selvatheepan was admitted to hospital for treatment and a police complaint was lodged.

- www.colobogazette.com at <http://goo.gl/jbqf89>



Journalists and activists from the North and South protest in Jaffna against threats to Tamil journalists. Source: Vikalpa

May 01, 2014:

Journalist Assaulted

A group of persons attempted to abduct the provincial correspondent of the News 1st (MBC/MTV network) in Godakawela (Ratnapura district), Mr Mahinda Pushpakumara, as he attempted to report the snatching of an elephant calf from the Udawalawe National Park in the night.

- www.newsfirst.lk at <http://goo.gl/hyLjbB>

June 16, 2014:

Journalist Threatened, Driver Assaulted

Journalist Mr Binoy Suriarachi of the Sunday Leader English weekend newspaper was threatened and his driver was assaulted by a violent mob in Aluthgama on 16th June. He had gone to Aluthgama with two other journalists to cover the communal violence that has erupted in the area on 15th June.

- www.colombogazette.com at <http://goo.gl/yHixf3>

June 16, 2014:

TV Crew Attacked

A crew from a local TV station Swarnavahini was obstructed as they were travelling to Aluthgama and were almost assaulted. They escaped without injuries, but a camera was damaged.

- www.ft.lk at <http://goo.gl/fd8deH>

June 17, 2014:

Aljazeera Team Attacked

Mobs also attacked a media team from the Al Jazeera network travelling to Mathugama and Aluthgama on 17th June, manhandling their cameramen and causing damage to their vehicle.

- www.ft.lk at <http://goo.gl/QOWVCI>

- www.aljazeera.com at <http://goo.gl/9qUddV>

THREATS

March 28, 2014:

Buddhist Monks Invaded a Media Workshop; Forced to Abandon

A two-day media workshop organized by the "Search for Common Ground" in Polonnaruwa on the theme "search for peace" had to be abandoned after being interrupted by group of Buddhist monks.

- www.sundaytimes.lk at <http://goo.gl/J4d0lK>

May 23, 2014:

Media Workshop Cancelled by Military Force

A media workshop organised by the Transparency International, Sri Lanka (TISL) for Tamil journalists from the Northern and Eastern provinces had to be abandoned due to military intimidations. The Deer Park Hotel administration informed the organizers that a senior officer of the Military Intelligence Corp had informed them to stop the workshop.

- www.theindependent.lk at <http://goo.gl/lk8oNt> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)

June 07, 2014:

Media Workshop Forced to Be Abandoned for Second Time

A training workshop for Tamil journalists by the TISL at the Gold Sands Hotel, Negombo, Western Province, was disrupted by an unruly mob which enjoyed the police patronage. The mob had accused the TISL of supporting terrorists. Police warned the TISL organisers to vacate the hotel or face the consequences.

- www.tisrilanka.org at <http://goo.gl/4hDtTi>

June 07, 2014:

'Powerful Organisation' Threatened to Remove Journalists by Force

The same group of Tamil journalists moved then to the Galadari Hotel due to disruption of the workshop earlier in the day and were again forced to leave the hotel at midnight. The hotel management told TISL that a 'powerful organization' had forced them to remove the journalists, threatening that if they didn't comply, "they" would personally come and remove the journalists from the premises.

- www.tisrilanka.org at <http://goo.gl/JpfnfO>

July 01, 2014:

Defense Secretary Wants Action against Outspoken Bishop

Defense secretary, Mr Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, stated that if there is a definition of hate speech, he would have taken action against Bishop Rayappu Joseph a long time ago. Bishop Rayappu Joseph is an outspoken critique of the government's policies and practices in relation to Tamil people's rights.

- www.dailymirror.lk at <http://goo.gl/Q6p2mk>

July 11, 2014:

Journalists Threatened and Coverage Blocked by Navy

Journalists working for Jaffna media who went to report the pre-emptive surveying of private Tamil land in Vali North were threatened by the Sri Lankan Navy and warned that "this is our region, you cannot take photographs within this".

- www.tamilguardian.com at <http://goo.gl/dcXsYz>

July 14, 2014:

Mannar Journalist Faced Continuous Harassments

The Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) of the Sri Lanka Police continued to harass Tamil journalist Mr S.R. Lambart from Mannar in the month of July. Mr Lambart had been asked to appear at the TID in Colombo on 14th July through an instruction written in Sinhala.

- www.tamilnet.com at <http://goo.gl/B41H6j> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)



Journalist S.R. Lambart threatened repeatedly. Source: Facebook

July 18, 2014:

Two Journalists Harassed by an Unruly Mob

Journalists Mr Shamal Liyanaarachchi of Janarala and Mr Udeni Chandrasiri of Divaina who went to the Dewaram Wehara temple in Pannipitiya (a suburb in Colombo district) to find out about a story of three baby elephants kept there, were harassed and assaulted by an unruly crowd.

- www.divaina.com at <http://goo.gl/8v8SFi>

July 25, 2014:

Tamil Journalists Harassed and Threatened

11 Tamil Journalists from the Northern Province were obstructed by Sri Lankan Police, Army and Intelligence joint operation while travelling to Colombo on the night of 25th July / early morning of 26th July to attend a workshop and a discussion on digital security in Colombo.

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/8v8SFi>

July 26, 2014:

Pro Government Mob Threatened a Media Workshop

A workshop on Digital Media Security for a group of media personnel from Jaffna which was to be held at the Sri Lanka Press Institute had to be abandoned due to threats by a government orchestrated mob. The leader of the mob stated that "if this institute allows any such training in the future, don't say we are bad boys".

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/v5C8IH>

July 31, 2014:

Film Maker Threatened by Extremists

The police requested Mr Sirimal Wijesinghe, a writer and film director, to appear at police to record a statement pertaining to a complaint lodged by certain religious organizations over a film on the current situation which Mr Wijesinghe was going to produce. He had published a press statement regarding the film resulting in a series of threats from religious extremists. He was then compelled to go into hiding for safety reasons.

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/On6glp>

INTIMIDATIONS

April 07, 2014:

Lead Story Dictated by the Military

The military officer phoned and requested Tamil language newspapers in the Northern region to publish the victory of the Sri Lankan cricket team at the T20 Cricket World Cup as their lead story.

- www.srilankamirror.com at <http://goo.gl/5cytL8> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)

April 09, 2014:

Chief Editor Questioned; Forced to Resign

Chief Editor of the Lankima newspaper, Mr Saman Wagaarchchi, was summoned and subjected to lengthy questioning by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on 9th April, on the issue of a caption of a photo related to Mrs Anoma Rajapaksa, wife of the Secretary to the Ministry of Defense and brother of the President. Later he was forced to resign from the newspaper.

- www.ft.lk at <http://goo.gl/UboqPB>

July 07, 2014:

Al Jazeera Journalist Questioned

Al Jazeera online journalist, Mr Dinouk Colombage, was interrogated for four hours by the Criminal Investigations Division (CID) over his reporting about the Aluthgama riots. Mr Colombage's lawyers also stated that the CID had questioned him extensively about his relationship with the Al Jazeera network.

- www.lankanewsweb.net at <http://goo.gl/mTakRm> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)

July 08, 2014:

Poster Campaign to Intimidate 2 HRDs

Posters for selling puppies were pasted near the Fort Railway Station which included contact numbers of two prominent human rights defenders, Mrs Nimalka Fernando, President of IMADR and Mr Sunil Jayasekara, convener of the Free Media Movement, in order to intimidate them into silence on human rights issues.

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/HPivom>

July 20, 2014:

Attempts to Intimidate a Dissenting Writer

A state-sponsored operation has started to intimidate journalists, civil society activists and politicians who publicly criticize certain actions of the government, so it was reported. In one such instance, the Criminal Investigation Department of the police has telephoned the neighbours of dissenting columnist, Mr Gamini Viyangoda, to inquire about him.

- www.srilankamirror.com at <http://goo.gl/FTZIRG> (accessible in Sri Lanka only through a proxy)

August 02, 2014:

Six Journalists Named as Jihadist

Six working journalists in Sri Lanka have been named as Jihadist, according to an article published in The Nation newspaper quoting an unnamed email.

- www.srilankabrief.org at <http://goo.gl/15YrjL>

This factsheet was published with the support of the Sri Lanka Advocacy Network, Germany. It was researched, compiled and edited by the Sri Lanka Brief team.

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