

Sri Lanka: Amnesty International calls for independent investigation into shooting of newspaper editor

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Amnesty International has today (8 Jan) urged the government of Sri Lanka to publicly condemn the killing of Lasantha Wickramatunga, the editor of the Sunday Leader newspaper, and other attacks on media workers, and to launch an independent investigation.

Mr Wickramatunga was shot on Thursday morning (local time) by unidentified gunmen while travelling in Mount Lavinia, Colombo. He was rushed to Kalubowila hospital where he died.

To date, Amnesty International is unaware of any investigation that has led to the arrest and prosecution of those believed responsible for the killing of journalists and other media workers.

Amnesty International UK Campaigns Director, Tim Hancock said:

'The lack of any thorough investigations into unlawful killings suggests that these kinds of attacks can continue with impunity.'

The Sunday Leader has carried a number of articles exposing political interference and corruption in privatisation deals. Sunday Leader commentators have also drawn attention to human rights abuses in the context of intensified fighting.

This is not the first time that the Sunday Leader and its staff has come under attack: in 2007, the printing presses at Leader group of Publications were attacked by ten armed men who threatened employees and set fire to some of the equipment and the newspaper that had just been printed.

In 2006, Lasantha Wickramatunga was threatened with arrest under anti-terrorist laws over a story criticising the President.

The shooting comes just two days after the privately owned MVC/MTV television studios in Colombo were ransacked by a gang of attackers who used claymore bombs to damage property.

Tim Hancock said:

'Journalists are increasingly frightened to express alternative views in Sri Lanka. Amnesty international has received increasing reports of death threats to independent journalists.'

'Ensuring respect for human rights around the world very often relies on impartial and rigorous media coverage. Without exposure and public scrutiny, abuses can flourish under a veil of secrecy and denial. The climate of impunity for attacks on the media has made it impossible to get an accurate impartial picture of what is happening.'

Background

At least 14 media workers have been unlawfully killed in Sri Lanka since the beginning of 2006. Others have been arbitrarily detained, tortured and allegedly disappeared while in the custody of security forces. More than 20 journalists have left the country in respon