

STOP! WAR ON JOURNALISTS



Safeguard media freedom and guarantee the safety and security of journalists in Sri Lanka

Media freedom is an essential feature of a vibrant democracy. An independent and professional media able to function without interference or influence from government and other partisan influences and exists for the social, political, cultural and economic betterment of polity and society is an integral part of democratic governance. It is a vital tool to effect progressive change.

However, independent media and journalists in Sri Lanka today are terrorized through a spate of killings, abductions, assaults, arbitrary arrests and detentions. They are subject to violence, both physical and verbal, to a degree that is unprecedented.

We the undersigned as political parties endorse and affirm the vital issues raised below by the five media organizations and urgently request the Government and other relevant stakeholders to take immediate and meaningful steps to enact solutions to address these problems.

- We note that the Government has failed to complete or conclude any of the investigations on attacks, threats and acts of terrorism against the media and journalists during the past two years.
- We are alarmed that although violent attacks on media personnel who opposed the brutish entry of MP Dr. Mervyn Silva to the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation on 27th December 2007 after a Presidential directive, threats against the "Sirasa" media network were with complete impunity publicly carried out on the Vesak Poya day by the same individual and have failed to result in any open investigation.
- We note with dismay that the official website of the Defense Ministry has repeated and with complete impunity labeled media institutes, editors and journalists as traitors, requesting soldiers to treat them as they would terrorists. The same website has also demanded that media adopt self-censorship in the name of "national security" and the "fight against terrorism", openly calling for the (violent if necessary) curtailment of media freedom as a necessary sacrifice in defense of larger freedoms.
- We are deeply disconcerted to note that the Government is impervious to the violent rhetoric and hate speech of Hudson Samarasinghe, Chairman of the State own Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, who on air viciously threatened and named independent journalists and media organizations as being inimical to "national security".
- We find utterly unacceptable and reprehensible the thinly veiled death threats made on 26th May 2008 by the Defense Secretary
- Gotabaya Rajapakse against the President and Secretary of the Working Journalists' Association of Sri Lanka, Messrs. Sanath Balasuriya and Poddala Jayantha respectively, if they did not give up their media activism.
- We are saddened by the fact that journalists in Jaffna are unable to go out in the field to pursue their livelihoods. Where previously over 200 journalists worked in the embattled peninsula, the continued attacks on "Uthayan" news paper has compelled its Editor and News Editor to live within the precincts of the publishing house for over an year, in fear of their lives. The resulting fear psychosis has completely paralyzed independent coverage of events and processes related to war, peace and governance in the region.
- We unequivocally condemn the continued detention of Journalist J.S. Tissainayagam for over 135 days by the TID, without any charges and the labeling of Tamil female journalist Maunuswamy Parameshwarie as a terrorist by senior government figures despite her being cleared of any such charge by the Supreme Court.
- We vehemently decry all attacks by government-sponsored goons on peaceful public protests in Puttlam and in Colombo as an act against the freedom of association and expression.

Based on these issues, and called for urgent action to address these growing challenges, we express our solidarity with the five media organisations and pledge to work together and individually to safeguard and strengthen media freedom in Sri Lanka.

Ranil Wickramasinghe
(Opposition leader)
United National Party

Somawansa Amarasinghe
Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

R. Sambandan (M.P.)
Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi

Dr. Wickramabahu Karunaratne
Left Front

P. Chandrasekaran (M.P.)
Upcountry People's Front

Siritunga Jayasuriya
United Socialist party

Mangala Samaraweera (M.P.)
Sri Lanka Freedom Party (People Faction)

Rauff Hakeem (M.P.)
Sri Lanka Muslim Congress

Mano Ganeshan (M.P.)
Western Peoples Front

Vasudeva Nanayakkara
Democratic Left Front

Lal Wijenyake
Lanka Sama Samaja Party