

## **Media freedom in Sri Lanka**

01<sup>st</sup> of October 2009

### **The case of Lasantha Wikrematunge – an example of impunity**

**Killed on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2009**

**Lasantha Wickrematunge** reported on governmental waste, corruption and excess. He investigated corrupt military procurement deals, spoke out strongly and passionately for a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict and debunked blatant government propaganda on the war.

He genuinely felt that while it was important to eliminate the LTTE it was important also to respect the lives of minority Tamil civilians. However by bombing LTTE targets from the air and even treating civilian hospitals in LTTE controlled areas as legitimate targets the government itself was resorting to terrorism. And it is to this that Lasantha objected. These he called war crimes because had these targets been in majority Sinhala areas it is inconceivable that the government would have bombed them.

Lasantha knew he was on the government's hit list, but felt it cowardly to take precautions against an attack. In the course of the past several years, Lasantha has been the victim of physical assaults, shootings, and attempts to arrest him. Lasantha was constantly under threat. The presses of the newspapers he and his wife Sonali edited were set on fire. There were constant threats over the phone. The newspaper was sealed under emergency regulations. The Criminal Investigations Department (CID) was often sent to question him and his wife to reveal their sources that led to exposes of corruption and

The government owned ITN television channel on the day of Lasantha's murder made no mention of the assassination despite it having been by any yardstick the top story of the day. The other state media were little different: they relegated the story to a footnote at best.

The so called investigation into Lasantha's murder is not reported in any newspaper independent or otherwise.

#### **Lasantha killing – chronology of police deception**

1. Killed on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2009
2. Lasantha had his mobile phone with him when he was transported to Kalubowila hospital and tried to speak according to the persons who took him to hospital

3. He was dead on admission.
4. IGP stated that 4 police teams are deployed for the investigation
5. Only two police reports has been submitted to the Mount Lavinia police so far, ie HQL< special Crime Unit of Mirihana police station and HQL of Mount Lavinia police station .
6. By May it was only Mihihana police reporting to the court.
7. First step was cheking his mobile phone fpr calls made and received on 8<sup>th</sup> morning. Between 07.21- 10.31 he has made 18 calls and received 16, according to the police report on 16<sup>th</sup> January.
8. On 19<sup>th</sup> January Police obtained permission to investigate some more phone numbers
9. In the mean while police arrested a person named Sanjeewa Pushpakumara of Athidiya road, Dehiwala who was using Lasanth's mobile with a another Sim card. He had told that he bough the phone for 4000 SLR from a person named Sugath Perera. Sugath Perera was in prison for drug related offence by this time. Police could not verify how he got the mobile phone. Sugath Perera could not prove that he was at the kalubowila hospital at the time of Lasantha being admitted.
10. Police spokesperson told the media that this arrest was a break through in the investigation. But Mihihana police released Sanjeewa Pushpakumara saying he is not involved in the killing. Nocharges were filed against Sugatha Perera as well.
11. Police reported to the court that they are investigation on to whether Lasanatha had any links with LTTE. According to the police they found a piece of paper with the phone member of LTTE media coordinator Daya master when they arrest Sanjeewa Pushpakumara. He had told police that he took the number from Lasantha's phone. But University of Moratuwa gave report sayingt that there has not been any communication between Lasantha's phone and Daya masters phone.
12. On 16<sup>th</sup> April court ordered police to file a full report of the investigation.
13. Next court day was 30<sup>th</sup> April. Police didn't turn up to produce the investigation report.
14. 23<sup>rd</sup> July -. When Wickrematunge's murder trial was taken up at the Mt. Lavinia Magistrate's Court on Thursday, July 23, once again the Mirihana police failed to appear in court.
15. 4<sup>th</sup> August - The investigation into the murder of the slain Editor-in-Chief of The Sunday Leader Lasantha Wickrematunge has shown no progress for the past~seven months although the Mt. Lavinia Magistrate ordered the police to submit the investigation progress report to courts