

SRI LANKA



Area: 65,610 sq. km.
Population: 19,800,000.
Languages: Sinhala, Tamil, English.
Head of state: Mahinda Rajapakse.

The government and the military have intensified the war against the Tamil Tigers and President Mahinda Rajapakse has sworn to stamp out the rebellion, at the price of appalling human rights violations if necessary. Both the Sinhala and English-language press came under even greater pressure from the authorities in 2007. On their side, the Tamil Tigers allow no dissident voices in the areas they control.

Bolstered by military victories in the east of the country, the government of Mahinda Rajapakse, backed up by his brother, defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, has vowed to inflict military defeat on the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) who have stepped up attacks on Sinhala civilians and threats against journalists whom they consider to be in cahoots with the authorities. Security forces supported by militia have sown terror in Tamil areas, carrying out many extra-judicial executions, kidnappings and threats. Despite international condemnation, the government has used the fight against terrorism to justify this “dirty war”. The Tamil press has been badly affected by this strategy that is aimed at dissuading the Tamil population from supporting the LTTE.

In the capital Colombo, the government, allied to ultra-nationalists of the right and the left, cracked down on independent press groups, closing a radio network and publications in Sinhala. Officials have made frequent statements hostile to press freedom activists and investigative journalists, forcing the best known of them, Iqbal Athas, to temporarily flee the country.

Access to conflict zones is virtually impossible for journalists and the war of words and statistics between the government and the LTTE spilled over into the press. This was the case in January when the army vaunted the success of its bombardment of an LTTE military base in Padahuthurai, eastern Sri Lanka. But the Tamil Tigers said that 15 civilians had been killed in the attack, which they claimed had not hit any military objective. Since no independent journalist was able to reach the scene, the majority of the Sinhala and English language press in Colombo carried the government account without being able to check it, while Tamil news websites and media carried news and footage put out by LTTE.

The government, ever more resistant to international pressure, refused to allow UN observers into the country and summoned several ambassadors who had expressed opinions about human rights in the country. The national human rights commission is so lacking in independence that it lost its international status in 2007. Since March it has been preventing its offices from providing information to the media on certain cases.

TERROR IN JAFFNA

The northern Jaffna Peninsula, where Tamils are in the majority and which the army directly administers, has become a nightmare for journalists, human rights activists and civilians in general. A wave of murders, kidnappings, threats and censorship has made it one of the most dangerous places in the world for the press. Two journalists were killed there during the year, two more kidnapped and at least three media have been the victims of direct attacks on them. Scores of journalists have fled the region and others have chosen to abandon the profession altogether.

The Tamil militia of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) who back the security forces in their fight against the LTTE, have been implicated in many violent episodes. Their leader, Douglas Devananda, is also social affairs minister. In the east, a militia formed from a group that broke away from the LTTE has sowed terror.

A gunman on a motorbike killed a young reporter, Selvarajah Rajivarnam, who was riding his bike near the office of Jaffna's biggest selling daily *Uthayan* at the end of April. He covered criminal cases, going into police stations and the hospital to obtain information about murders and disappearances. Several sources in Jaffna said members of the EPDP could be behind the killing. Also in April,

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the editor of local magazine *Nilam*, Chandrabose Suthakaran, was murdered at his home in the government-controlled town of Vavuniya in northern Sri Lanka. Police have failed to find the killers.

Two armed men who arrived on a motorbike burst into the home of journalism student Sahathevan Nilakshan, three kilometres from Jaffna on 2 August and shot him several times, leaving him fatally wounded. He was also a member of the management of a Tamil-language magazine *Chaa'laram*, linked to the student federation in Jaffna district. Another journalist, Kangarajan Prashanthan, working for the nationalist Tamil-language paper *Navadu Eelandu* until its closure in 2006, might easily have been killed in October but gunmen murdered his twin brother in a mistaken identity attack.

TWO JOURNALISTS DISAPPEARED

Sri Lanka holds the record for the greatest number of disappearances reported to the UN. Among them are two Jaffna journalists: Subramaniam Ramachandran, a journalist on *Thinakural*, who has not been seen since February after being arrested by the army; and Vadivel Nimalarajah, a sub editor on *Uthayan*, who was abducted from the street, after spending the night working at his office.

Neither of these disappearances has been seriously investigated, despite government promises and the identification of some suspects. Similarly, the killing of two staff in a bloody attack on the offices of *Uthayan* in May 2006, went uninvestigated by police, even though the paper's management provided the authorities with the name of a suspect, Valluvan, a militant in the pro-government EPDP militia. However witnesses, quoted by *Uthayan*, saw Valluvan in 2007 in the administration offices in Jaffna.

TAMILS DEPRIVED OF INDEPENDENT NEWS

Throughout the year, the government and its allies have tried to block the flow of independent sources of news in Tamil. Those living in the north and east of the country, already isolated by the war,

have also been gradually deprived of media not affiliated either to the government or an armed group. For their part, the LTTE increased their surveillance of Tamil journalists, threatening those who dare to criticise them openly. And the media in the areas in which they control are forced to relay the movement's belligerent propaganda.

Some staff on *Uthayan* live spend time holed up in their offices in the centre of Jaffna. One journalist lived there permanently in 2007 for fear of being killed in the street. "We had 120 staff, of whom 20 were journalists, before August 2006. Now there are only 55 of whom five are journalists, who are prepared to face up to the risks", editor M. V. Kaanamylnaatha said in June when he welcomed Reporters Without Borders to his Jaffna office.

Until May the Jaffna press went through huge problems to obtain essential supplies. The regions three titles were being asphyxiated by the authorities, who from August 2006 onwards refused to allow ink and newsprint on the list of goods that could be delivered to Jaffna. Despite their growing popularity, *Uthayan*, *Yarl Thinakural* and *Valampuri* were forced to drastically reduce their pagination and circulation. Finally after pressure, mostly from abroad, the army lifted its embargo and stock was able to arrive from the capital by boat.

The information ministry decided on 25 October to suspend the licences of five radio stations - *Sun FM*, *Gold FM*, *Hiru FM*, *Shaa FM* and *Surayan FM* - belonging to the privately-owned Asia Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) group for putting out a news item that turned out to be wrong. It was the president in person who ordered the investigation. The ABC group, several hundred of whose staff lost their jobs because of the closures, had always stood up to the authorities. The director of the Tamil-language *Surayan FM* was kidnapped in Colombo in 2006. In January 2008, the government opened new negotiations with the ABC management, which asked some employees to return to work.

The English-language news website *Tamilnet*, which is very popular because it often provides exclusive news about the situation in the LTTE-controlled

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areas, was blocked by the country's Internet service providers on 15 June. A bullet to the head had killed the website's director, Dharmaratnam Sivaram "Taraki", in April 2005 in Colombo. The authorities once again in 2007 blocked an investigation that had begun with the arrest of a suspect, a member of a pro-government Tamil party.

One by one Tamil correspondents for the national and international press have been leaving the north and east and sometimes the country, after receiving threats. When a Reporters Without Borders' representative was in Jaffna in June, the correspondent for the *Associated Press* received a text message and a call from a satellite phone telling him it was his last warning before his execution. He left Jaffna the following day.

"I have never seen anything like it. Even in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, foreign journalists had more freedom of movement", a journalist working for *Agence France-Presse* told Reporters Without Borders after returning from reporting in Jaffna. He had only been allowed to visit the city accompanied by a military escort and had not been able to interview a single resident. A British television film crew was in October also prevented from working in the peninsula, even though they had obtained permission from the defence ministry. Soldiers forced the three journalists to stay at the Palaly military bases and escorted them round Jaffna for two hours before telling them to return to Colombo.

In its war against the LTTE, the army at the end of November bombed the installations of the movement's official radio, near Killinochchi in the north. Nine civilians, three of them station staff, were killed and around a dozen more were injured. The radio *Voice of Tigers* is certainly a propaganda radio run by the LTTE, but the attack violates rules of engagement that restrict military bombing to strictly military targets.

By contrast, the pressure brought to bear by the LTTE was less visible than that of the authorities, but was every bit as effective. The separatist movement has never hesitated to go after dissidents within the Tamil community and the press is no

exception to this rule. The head of a Tamil media explained: "We know that the reaction of the LTTE can also be potentially harmful for our staff, so we are very careful. We weigh every word when we talk about the LTTE and the army. And naturally we never refer to the Tigers as terrorists". The LTTE intelligence services often summon or call Tamil journalists when they want them to provide them with information.

OFFICIALS TURNED INTO GANG LEADERS

Some ministers behave like gang leaders. Labour minister, Mervyn Silva, arrived with his henchmen at the offices of the state-run television *Rupavahini*, in Colombo in December and ordered one of his men to beat the news editor because he had failed to broadcast a speech he just made while formally opening a new bridge. Police were forced to intervene and the minister left the building under a hail of insults.

The same minister had in January incited his supporters to physically attack journalists, including a *BBC* correspondent, who were covering a peaceful rally. He said in April that "journalists behave like mad dogs and they have to be injected against rabies".

The defence secretary and younger brother of the president, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, in April called the editor of the *Daily Mirror*, Champika Liyanaarachchi, on his mobile phone and threatened her, saying that she would escape reprisals only if she resigned. He said he would put pressure on the newspaper's management to ensure she was dismissed. He also threatened to "exterminate" the journalist Uditha Jayasinghe, for writing articles about the plight of civilian war casualties. Security forces on two occasions also accused the *Daily Mirror* of betraying the country.

OBSTACLES INCREASINGLY PUT IN THE WAY OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

The prominent investigative journalist Iqbal Athas and several of his colleagues on the *Sunday Times* were in August victims of a campaign of harassment orchestrated by army officers wanting to silence them after revelations about the purchase of MIG-27

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warplanes from Ukraine. The government staged demonstrations outside the home of Iqbal Athas in Colombo accusing him of being a “traitor”. After his police protection was removed, Athas left the country for several weeks and suspended his column that specialised in military affairs.

An article posted on the defence ministry website on 2 October accused the journalist of taking part in “psychological operations by the LTTE terrorists”. A few days earlier, after Athas had just resumed his column in the *Sunday Times*, army spokesman, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakara, called on the media to stop publishing his articles.

The authorities also sponsored an arson attack in November on the printers of the Leader Publications group, sending in around 15 men, with the complicity of the army, who mistreated two staff before spraying machines with petrol and torching them. The group publishes the

English-language weeklies *The Sunday Leader* and *Morning Leader*, the Sinhala-language weekly *Irudina* and the Tamil-language daily *Sudar Oli*. The raiders destroyed thousands of copies of the *Morning Leader* which were due for distribution that morning. The editor of the *Sunday Leader*, Lasantha Wickramatunga, known for his investigations and critical editorials, condemned the attack as a commando operation backed by the government.

The few Tamil journalists who tried to carry out investigative work were also targeted. In August, Kalimuttu Palamohan, known as K. P. Mohan, a specialist in military affairs for the Tamil-language daily *Thinakkural*, had acid thrown at him as he returned to his home in Colombo. Soldiers had attacked the journalist two months earlier. “When I showed them my press card they insulted me and then called other colleagues who beat me”, K. P. Mohan said about the first incident.