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Sri Lanka: End Witch Hunt Against the Media and NGOs

The Sri Lankan government should end its harassment of journalists and activists and take steps against those making threats, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said in a joint statement today.

Since the January 2010 presidential election, the government has engaged in a campaign to silence and discredit journalists and nongovernmental organizations. A recently leaked document, which appears to be a government surveillance list of more than 30 journalists and activists, significantly raises concerns about the safety of the people on the list, the organizations said.

“The Sri Lankan government is conducting a carefully coordinated witch hunt aimed at discrediting critics of the government,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “This is extremely dangerous and irresponsible in a country where journalists and activists have often been threatened and killed.”

On March 4, the directors of two highly respected Sri Lankan organizations, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL), wrote a joint letter [<http://www.cpalanka.org/page.php?id=0&pubid=690&key=9bdd5f06c37bdab66735ca41a9457925>] to President Mahinda Rajapaksa expressing their grave concern about a press report of the government’s apparent surveillance list. The list places the directors of the CPA and TISL among several people in the top category, presumably meaning that they are under particularly close surveillance.

News about the government surveillance list emerged amidst a government campaign in the media to discredit nongovernmental organizations. In several statements since February 20, government officials have made vague and unproven accusations against various groups, claiming that they have attempted to “destabilize democracy” in Sri Lanka.

Concerns about the safety of individuals on the alleged government surveillance list are heightened because of previous death threats and attacks, the organizations said. In September 2008 unknown persons threw two grenades at the TISL director’s house. In August 2009 the director of the CPA received an anonymous death threat by mail. The authorities have failed to hold anyone accountable for either of the incidents.

Both the CPA and TISL played a crucial role in monitoring the January presidential election, reporting on electoral violations and the government’s misuse of state resources to campaign in favor of the incumbent, Mahinda Rajapaksa.

“This smacks of retaliation for reporting on violations during the presidential election,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director. “Despite the elections and the end of the war against the Tamil Tigers, the government seems to have a hard time getting rid of the habit of repression.”

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