

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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## **The dangers of reporting on human rights in Sri Lanka**

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/dangers-reporting-human-rights-sri-lanka-2013-11-15>

When world leaders disembark in Colombo for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) this week, they will have to look beyond newsstands to find out what is really going on in Sri Lanka.

Because in the South Asian country, only a few dare to write the truth, since the consequences for criticizing the government and its policies are, simply, too terrifying.

Sandya Eknaligoda knows exactly how dangerous it can be.

Her husband, journalist and cartoonist Prageeth, has been missing for nearly four years.

The last time she saw him, on 24 January 2010, he was leaving home to participate in a public event in support of the opposition candidate for the presidential elections, which were due to take place two days later.

“When I come back this evening, I will help you with your insurance paperwork,” he told her before walking out the door.

But, when he never made it back that evening, Sandya knew something was very wrong.

### **‘I felt that something had happened’**

Prageeth had already been abducted by men in a white van in August 2009 and released a day later. Since then, he and Sandya had agreed he would call her if he thought he would arrive back home later than 9pm. But that evening he never called, and his mobile phone rang out, unanswered.

“I felt that something had happened. I started to get scared. I went to see friends but was not able to find any information,” Sandya told Amnesty International.

The following day, she went to the police to report her husband missing. But no investigation was initiated.

The police didn't want to accept the report, and suggested people were just trying to get publicity by saying they are disappeared.

A week later, with Prageeth still missing, Sandya went to the police headquarters, to the local human rights commission and reached out to anyone else who would listen.

An international campaign got under way, calling on the Sri Lankan authorities to investigate and reveal his whereabouts.

Nearly four years since his enforced disappearance no one knows what happened to him. Hearings into his case continue.

“Looking for Prageeth has become my religion. I will never leave this campaign until the day I find him or get justice for him. Sometimes you get scared, when you notice you are being followed or when people say you are being followed. But for me, the desire to find Prageeth is larger than any fears,” Sandya said.

**Punished for thinking differently**

Sandya believes her husband was abducted because of his criticism of the authorities and because of his research into allegations that the Sri Lankan army used chemical weapons in the north of the country in 2008, a year before the end of the lengthy internal armed conflict.

The offices of Lanka-e-News, the website he worked for, was targeted in an arson attack in February 2011 which left them mostly destroyed. The website's founder and editor, Sandaruwan Senadheera, now lives in exile after repeated death threats prompted him to flee the country.

Human rights organizations including Amnesty International say that stories such as Prageeth's are common in Sri Lanka.

Journalists who dare to criticize the authorities have been arrested and tortured. Some have even been killed and many have fled the country, fearing for their lives.

According to media freedom activists, at least 15 media workers have been killed since 2006 and more than 80 journalists have gone into exile since 2005.

In most cases, those responsible for the abuses never face justice.

"Things will only change if heads of government who go to [CHOGM] raise these issues. They should put pressure on [Sri Lanka's President Mahinda] Rajapaksa on human rights issues. If that doesn't happen and the heads of government who go there fail to address these issues and hand him the [Chair] of the Commonwealth, then the situation will not change," Sandya said.