

PUBLIC

AI Index: ASA 37/13/98

28 May 1998

Further information on UA 49/98 (ASA 37/03/98, 13 February 1998) - Death threat / Fear of extrajudicial execution

SRI LANKA Iqbal Athas, journalist

Serious concern continues for the safety of Iqbal Athas and his family who remain under police protection subsequent to his attempted abduction on 12 February 1998 by five gunmen who forcibly entered his home threatening him and his family.

The failed abduction attempt, by men believed to be working on behalf of the security services, followed continued periods of harassment. This is believed to be connected to Iqbal Athas's work as a senior journalist specializing in defence-related reporting and his current investigations into corruption in the top echelons of the security forces, particularly the Air Force. It is also linked to his outspoken criticisms of some of the military actions undertaken in the ongoing conflict between the security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It was discovered that vehicles used for surveillance of his home were registered as being owned by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).

Following widespread condemnation, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga ordered a CID enquiry into the incident. A ministerial statement was also issued which said that: "steps have already been taken to ensure that the offenders are dealt with in terms of the law, irrespective of position, rank or influence they may wield in Sri Lankan society."

On 5 May, Iqbal Athas and a member of his household were able to identify two Air Force officers, a squadron leader and a flight lieutenant who had been taken into custody, as being involved in the abduction attempt. At the time they were reportedly personal bodyguards for the then Air Force Commander -- since forced to retire, possibly as a result of the large-scale corruption in the Air Force exposed by Iqbal Athas.

They were remanded in custody until 8 May but then released on bail. Although the CID have stated that they intended to make more arrests, none have so far been made. The CID have stated, however, that further arrests will be made prior to the next court hearing scheduled for 10 June.

FURTHER RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or in your own language:

- welcoming the investigation being carried out into the continuing harassment and attempted abduction of Iqbal Athas on 12 February 1998 and asking to be kept informed of progress in bringing those responsible to justice;
- urging that all necessary steps be taken in the meantime to protect Iqbal Athas and any other witnesses involved against intimidation or threats.

APPEALS TO:

Her Excellency President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga
Presidential Residence
"Temple Trees"
Colombo 3, Sri Lanka
Telegrams: President Kumaratunga, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Faxes: + 94 1 33 37 03
Salutation: Your Excellency

The Hon (General) Anuruddha Ratwatte
Deputy Minister of Defence
Ministry of Defence
15/5 Baladaksha Mawatha
Colombo 3, Sri Lanka

Telegrams: Deputy Defence Minister, Colombo, Sri Lanka
Faxes: + 94 1 54 15 29 / 68 77 68 / 43 05 90
Salutation: Dear Deputy Minister

The Hon Mangala Samaraweera
Minister of Post, Telecommunications and Media
World Trade Centre
Colombo 1, Sri Lanka

Telegrams: Media Minister, Colombo, Sri Lanka
Faxes: + 94 1 44 04 88 / 43 07 83 / 54 15 31
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Sri Lanka accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 9 July 1998.