

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety

19 June 1998

SRI LANKA Lasantha Wickrematunge, journalist

Anti-tank bullets were fired at the house of Lasantha Wickrematunge, a newspaper editor and journalist, during the night of 17 June 1998. There is concern for his safety.

Lasantha Wickrematunge edits *Sunday Leader*, an independent weekly newspaper which is openly critical of the government in Sri Lanka and has alleged government corruption.

Minutes after Lasantha Wickrematunge and his family returned home on the evening of 17 June, an unknown number of individuals reportedly opened fire from a van outside his house. Four windows were broken and two vehicles damaged. Two bullet shots were later discovered inside the house and 40 spent T56 anti-tank cartridges were found outside.

The attack has been condemned by the Minister of Post, Telecommunications and Media, Mangala Samaraweera, who has called for a thorough police investigation into the incident. Two police constables have been posted outside his house.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the past week an unidentified vehicle has reportedly surveilled Lasantha Wickrematunge's house on several occasions. He reportedly also receives anonymous telephone threats at the time of broadcast of a regular political discussion television programme he hosts.

Three years ago, Lasantha Wickrematunge was assaulted outside his house by three unidentified men who warned him against criticizing the government. Noone has been brought to justice in relation to this assault.

The most recent attack on Lasantha Wickrematunge follows several incidents of harassment and threats of journalists in Sri Lanka this year. On 12 February 1998 air force personnel attempted to abduct Iqbal Athas, a senior military reporter, from his home and threatened his family. In the same month Pradeep Dhamaratne, a provincial reporter for a newspaper which exposed trade in illicit liquor, was taken in for questioning by police in the middle of night and reportedly tortured.

On 5 June the government imposed censorship on all media reports of the ongoing conflict between security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. All reports of military operations, and statements about the official conduct or performance of members of the armed forces or the police force must be approved by a military censor. Those who publish uncensored reports can be punished under emergency regulations which allow detention for long periods without charge or trial.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Lasantha Wickrematunga following the attack on his house on 17 June 1998;
- noting the government's announcement that a police investigation is being carried out and urging the authorities to ensure that the investigation is full and impartial;

- urging that those responsible are identified and appropriate action taken against them;
- noting steps authorities have taken to guarantee his security, and urging that all necessary measures continue to be taken to protect Lasantha Wickrematunga and his family 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 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 1 August 1998.