

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

NEWS FLASH

AI Index: ASA 37/001/2009

Date: 8 January 2009

Sri Lanka: Newspaper Editor Shot Dead

Lasantha Wickramatunga, editor of the *Sunday Leader* newspaper, was shot on Thursday morning by unidentified gunmen while travelling in Mount Lavinia, Colombo. Mr Wickramatunga was rushed to Kalubowila hospital where he died.

Amnesty International urges the government of Sri Lanka to publicly condemn this and other attacks on the media and launch an independent investigation. To date, Amnesty International is unaware of any investigation that has led to the arrest and prosecution of those believed responsible for the killing of journalists and other media workers. The lack of any thorough investigations into unlawful killings means that these kinds of attacks can continue with impunity.

The *Sunday Leader* has carried a number of articles exposing political interference and corruption in privatisation deals. Sunday Leader commentators have also drawn attention to human rights abuses in the context of intensified fighting.

This is not the first time that the *Sunday Leader* and its staff has come under attack: in 2007, the printing presses at Leader group of Publications were attacked by 10 armed men who threatened employees and set fire to some of the equipment and the newspaper that had just been printed. In 2006, Lasantha Wickramatunga was threatened with arrest under anti-terrorist laws over a story criticising the President.

The shooting comes just two days after the privately owned MVC/MTV television studios in Colombo was ransacked by a gang of attackers who used claymore bombs to damage property.

Journalists are increasingly frightened to express alternative views in Sri Lanka. Amnesty international has received increasing reports of death threats to independent journalists.

Ensuring respect for human rights around the world very often relies on impartial and rigorous media coverage. Without exposure and public scrutiny, abuses can flourish under a veil of secrecy and denial. The climate of impunity for attacks on the media has made it impossible to get an accurate impartial picture of what is happening.

Background

At least 14 media workers have been unlawfully killed in Sri Lanka since the beginning of 2006. Others have been arbitrarily detained, tortured and allegedly disappeared while in the custody of security forces. More than 20 journalists have left the country in response to death threats.

END/

Public Document

For more information please call Carina Trimingham in Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5871 or email: carina.trimingham@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org