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Sri Lanka: Silencing Dissent

As hostilities in Sri Lanka intensify and human rights abuses increase, threats to the media and media freedoms inside the country have increased dramatically, says a new Amnesty International report, *Silencing Dissent*, published today.

The organisation has found that since the beginning of 2006 at least ten media workers have been the victims of unlawful killings; at least two have disappeared; while others have been tortured and arbitrarily detained under emergency regulations (ERs) granting the government sweeping powers.

The report also shows that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) does not allow any independent local media in the territories it controls, and closely monitors and restricts the work of journalists. On occasion, the LTTE has also targeted journalists in other parts of the country.

“Investigations have stalled and no one has been brought to justice for the deaths of media workers including cases dating back to 1990. Amnesty International calls on the Sri Lankan authorities to bring the people responsible to justice and end immediately the impunity with which the security forces carry out their intimidation of the media,” said Pia Oberoi, deputy director of Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific programme.

“Clamping down on media freedoms corrodes free speech, strangles debate, and prevents a true assessment of human rights abuses taking place. Amnesty International condemns the government’s campaign of intimidation against the media, and calls on it to respect and protect the freedom of the media to work without fear.

Journalists have also been targeted in the South, particularly those covering corruption issues. On 16 August 2007 the personal security provided by the government to veteran journalist Iqbal Athas was removed. Athas had been given police protection after being repeatedly threatened by members of the security forces who were angered by his coverage of arms deals.

The organisation also called on the LTTE to end its policy of intimidation of and crackdown against the media in the areas it controls.

The Karuna faction, a splinter group of the LTTE reportedly acting with the consent of the government forces, is also reported to have harassed media and stopped the distribution of *Sudar Oli* and *Thinnakkural* in Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara Districts (in the east) since at least January 2007.

In addition, there are increasing reports of intimidation of artists, including actors, writers and filmmakers. One film maker commenting on the banning of Asoka Handagama’s film *Aksharaya* (Letter of Fire) says the

government is trying to ban the film as part of a general drive “to stop political and socially sensitive cinema”.

“Frequent attacks on journalists and a climate of impunity are turning Sri Lanka into an Orwellian state where critical voices are stifled” said Oberoi.

Amnesty International calls on Sri Lanka authorities and the LTTE to:

- Respect and protect the rights to life, liberty and security of media workers in compliance with Sri Lanka’s obligations under international law
- Declare unequivocally that killings, threats, or other attacks on media workers will not be tolerated
- Ensure that all cases of attacks on media workers, irrespective of the identity of perpetrators or victims, are promptly, independently, impartially and effectively investigated.
- Respect and ensure respect for the right to freedom of opinion and expression, in compliance with Sri Lanka’s obligations under the ICCPR and other international treaties and standards.

Read more:

[Sri Lanka: Silencing Dissent](#) (Report, 7 February 2008)