



Press release / 28<sup>th</sup> January 2008

## **Sri Lankan Defense Secretary openly states he is favour of draconian censorship and criminal defamation**

27<sup>th</sup> January 2008, Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Free Media Movement (FMM) is appalled to learn that the brother of the Sri Lankan President and Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksha has openly stated that media has to be censored and criminal defamation brought back. He has gone on to name two leading media institutions that have to be brought, in his eyes, to book for their critical reportage.

Openly taking advantage of the spoils of nepotism, he demonstrates an utter and chilling disregard for media freedom in an interview published in the *Sunday Lankadeepa*, a Sinhala newspaper with wide circulation. Here are the relevant passages of his interview translated into English:

*"I think that there is no need to report any thing on the military. People do not want to know how many and what kind of arms we acquired. That is not media freedom. I tell without fear that if I have power I will not allow any of these things to write. I told the President that we need to bring press censorship at the beginning. I have been telling that we need bring in laws that can punish harshly for these reports... We need criminal defamation law... This is not media freedom although very few are doing this. Today media freedom is two - three persons freedom, isn't it? Ranjith Wijewardane's [proprietor of the Wijeya group, largest privately owned newspaper group] freedom somewhere else and Maharaja's [proprietor of largest privately owned electronic media group] freedom is elsewhere. Only those two institutions want their freedom. Every thing in this country has become prostituted, like peace, media is completely prostituted."*

Given that the Defense Secretary is a government servant, the brother of the President and that to date there has not been any comment to the contrary by the Government or the President, the FMM considers this to be the position of the government vis-à-vis media freedom in Sri Lanka. Needless to say, this ridicules tired pronouncements by the Media Minister that there is media freedom and no censorship in Sri Lanka.

We fear that this chilling warning from a Defense Secretary with unbridled power without, evidently, sound judgment, is the latest significant threat to the freedom of expression and media freedom in Sri Lanka. In many ways, the deplorable attitude towards media freedom by the Government now perfectly mirrors that of the LTTE they are fighting against.

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Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka

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We unequivocally condemn this latest public statement by the Defense Secretary. It is axiomatic that if a just peace is to be secured in Sri Lanka, media must be allowed to report on the excesses of war in the public interest. Those who do not toe the line of the government are now targets for assassination and physical harm, evidenced by the recent brutal attack against a journalist with the State television broadcaster Rupavahini who stood up against the brutish mindlessness of senior Government MP, Mervyn Silva in December last year. Given that no disciplinary action whatsoever has been taken to date against Mervyn Silva, despite repeated calls by the public and media, we firmly believe that the Government is in fact openly targeting journalists and media personnel who are critical of it and with complete impunity.

This is an untenable situation and we ask the Government to urgently clarify the Defense Secretary's comments, mindful of the fact that the all-consuming war against the LTTE is eroding what is left of media freedom in Sri Lanka daily. Soon, the only journalists left will be those who are unwilling and unable to write anything that holds public officials and government policy to scrutiny.

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