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Overview

Media freedom and the freedom of expression took an incredibly downturn in the month of October 2007 in Sri Lanka. Over a period of just two weeks, Kumudu Champika Jayawardana, a journalist working with www.ethalaya.org was shot on his way home from office, the government's shut down five FM radio channels belonging to ABC Networks was without any due process or proper investigation, highly placed government officials as well as the defense establishment indulged in vicious verbal attacks against media that analyzed and investigated the LTTE attack on the Saliyapura Airforce Base in Anuradhapura and Arthur Wamanan, a staff reporter of *The Sunday Leader* was arrested by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) on completely spurious grounds. Towards the end of the month, the government introduced and then rescinded an extraordinary gazette to censor media coverage of war efforts, demonstrating an essential schizophrenia that colours its appreciation of media freedom. The high profile visits of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour and the UN's top torture investigator, Manfred Novak, generated as expected vicious and vehement denials from the government, including attacks at the media that concurred with and reported some of their damning observations and findings that clearly demonstrated the deteriorating human rights situation and even State complicity in abductions and torture. Further, the state owned *Daily News* published a vicious attack against the FMM with all manner of fantastic allegations, penned under a

pseudonym. The worst form of propaganda is now found in the broadcast of discussions involving the President and also his brother, the Defense Secretary, to a hapless public.

All however, was not doom and gloom. Sunila Abeysekara, Director INFORM, Human Rights Documentation Centre and a committee member of the Free Media Movement (FMM), was awarded the prestigious Human Rights Defender Award by Human Rights Watch along with another journalist from Colombia. Speaking on the award, Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch said, “[Her] work exemplifies the ideals of the human rights movement: courage, an unswerving commitment to justice and genuine concern for the rights of all victims.”

However, as noted in our Press Release on 21st October, the incumbent government only “trusts” and finds “responsible” media that is servile and sycophantic. Journalists who in the public interest engage in investigative reporting are intimidated, threatened, shot at, killed and censored. Media and human rights activists are branded unpatriotic and LTTE sympathisers. The most vicious attacks are reserved for investigative journalism, such as that which brought to light the true destruction to property and life and the gross lapses in government security in relation to the audacious LTTE combined air and land attack in Anuradhapura. The FMM notes that the Prime Minister’s account to Parliament of the damage was completely incongruent to that which was initially stated by Military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara.

What is clear and tremendously worrying is the seemingly inexorable erosion of media freedom and the freedom of expression in Sri Lanka, aided and abetted by those in Government who show no real commitment towards supporting and strengthening either. It is a dangerous situation for media and human rights activists and one in which it is fairly clear that free media will only continue to deteriorate further.

Incidents impinging Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression in October 2007

2nd October: Government unleashes another attack on journalist Iqbal Athas

The official military spokesperson of the Government and the Ministry of Defense website unleashed another round of vicious verbal attacks against journalist Iqbal Athas for his coverage on defense related matters in Sri Lanka and in particular allegations of corruption in multi-million dollar defense procurements. Mr. Athas is the Associate Editor and the Defense Correspondent of *The Sunday Times*. An article in the defense ministry web site stated that:

“Mr. Athas’ recent work raises doubts whether he has been assisting in the psychological operations of the LTTE terrorists. ..Whoever attempts to reduce public support to the security forces or attempts to damage the loyalty of the soldiers towards their commanders at this moment can only be considered as those who serve the cause of the terrorists.”

5th October: Foreign media team barred from news reporting in Jaffna by the Sri Lankan military

The Sri Lankan military barred Quick Silver Media, traveling to many places in Sri Lanka in early October to produce a documentary for Channel 4 television in UK, from gathering news and information in Jaffna. Quick Silver Media had obtained MoD approval to shoot video in the Jaffna peninsula and interview citizens living in the area. Three female journalists from Quick Silver Media were asked to stay at an army base in Palaly instead of the guesthouse they had

booked in the Jaffna city centre. After taking them on a brief tour of Jaffna, the journalists were asked to leave on a commercial flight back to Colombo on 5th October.

7th October: Defense ministry to censor or approve *Sudu Kapuru Peti* television drama

The teledrama *Sudu Kapuru Pethi* directed by Atula Peries has been sent to the Ministry of Defense for approval by state controlled television station SLRC on national security grounds. There are no legal provisions for the MoD to censor any artistic and cultural productions. *Sudu Kapuru Pethi* was banned in September 2006 on same reasons but cleared by a committee appointed to give recommendations. The MoD has not yet given its verdict.

8th October: Government labels media critical of it as treacherous

As reported in the *Daily Mirror* newspaper on 8th October 2007, while urging the media to refrain from publishing any reports that would undermine the efforts of the armed forces, the Director General of the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS), Lakshman Hulugalle, told the media that: “*We consider anyone who criticizes the defense forces to be a traitor to the nation as such people undermine the lives of armed forces personnel.*”

12th October: Security forces censor media and delete photographs

Security force personnel forced journalists to leave the scene of an agitation by citizens in front of UN office in Jaffna in the embattled North of Sri Lanka, who had gathered to meet UN Human Rights Commissioner Louise Arbour during her visit to the Jaffna. Afterwards, they grabbed the camera of *Yal Thinakkural* journalist Sellaiyah Ruban and deleted all photos of the incident.

15th October: Government admits it produces counter propaganda

Government Defence Spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said on 15th October that the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS) had been set up not only to provide information related to the country's current security but also to produce counter propaganda against the LTTE. Responding to a question raised by a foreign journalist, the minister said the MCNS had to make counter propaganda to guard against and fight the false propaganda of the LTTE.

15th October: Supreme Court orders release of frozen CBE funds belonging to newspaper owner

The Supreme Court ordered that a part of the frozen bank accounts of the Ceylon Business Equipment Group of companies be released when the fundamental rights violation petition case filed by its Chairman Tiran Alles was taken up. In March 2007, two weekend newspapers, *Mawbima* and *The Weekend Standard* had to close down when government froze funds on political grounds. Mr. Alles is the Chairman of Standard Newspaper Private Limited group which published both newspapers.

17th October: Security forces censor media and photographers

The security forces prevented photo-journalists from taking photos of military truck transporting ammunitions which had met with an accident in Kosswatta, a suburb of Colombo. Security forces even banned using mobile phones at the scene. A camera belonging to Berti Mendis, a photographer at *The Sunday Times* was taken and its film exposed, destroying all his photos.

18th October: Minister chases away TV journalist from court premises

Member of Parliament Mervin de Silva shouted at and chased away Sirasa TV correspondents from the Mount Lavinia court premises. The TV journalist was there to cover a case related to his son, who was in remand prison over an alleged assault. Mr. Silva has viciously attacked media and journalists on several occasions in recent past but government has not taken any action to discipline him to date.

23rd October: Journalist arrested on uncorroborated statement by a Minister

The Criminal Investigations Department (CID) arrested the Sunday leader journalist Arthur Wamanan (23) on a complaint lodged by Minister Mano Wijeratne on 24th October. Arthur had called Mr. Wijeratna to obtain his comments using his mobile telephone with regard to a story that appeared in last Sunday's edition of *The Sunday Leader* titled "Minister gets Gem Authority to pay wife's roaming charges." Mr. Wijeratna complained that he received calls demanding ransom from the journalist. On 26th journalist Arthur Wamanan was granted bail and court reprimanded the CID saying arrests of this nature created a bad precedent besides being a threat to media freedom.

25th October: ABC radio network license withdrawn; 5 popular radio channels go off the air

On the night of Thursday, 26th October, the Ministry of Information of Sri Lanka withdrew the broadcasting license of the ABC radio network and ordered the station to stop broadcasting with immediate effect. The five channels thus taken off the air are Hiru (Sinhala) Sha (Sinhala) Gold (English) Sun (English) and Sooriyan (Tamil). Around 300 journalists and media staff employed by the ABC radio network lost their employment as result of the closure. The reason given by the government for this drastic action is related to a news item broadcast by the ABC channels regarding a suspected LTTE attack on Ranminitenna, a village in Tissamaharama in the south of Sri Lanka . This action was completely arbitrary and taken without any due process.

26th October: Meepura journalists threatened

A police officer attached to verbally abused *Meepura* journalists and chased away from an opening ceremony in Negombo on 26th October. The police officer was attached Negombo police station and *Meepura* editor has complained in writing to Senior Superintendent of Police. *Meepura* is a provincial newspaper, published in Negombo.

30th October: Journalist shot

Kumudu Champika Jayawardana of www.ethalaya.org was shot at around 10.45pm on the night of 30th October in Colombo, when he was returning home from office. He was admitted to Colombo General Hospital and underwent an urgent operation. www.ethalaya.com was recently launched as the online version of the popular Sinhala language TV channel Sirasa. Sirasa is part of the MTV/MBC network own by Capitol Maharaja Organisation Limited. Kumudu Champika Jayawardana is the news editor of www.ethalaya.com.

31st October: War reporting censorship imposed and withdrawn within three days

The Sri Lankan government imposed a censorship on media coverage of war through a special gazette notification dated 29th October under Emergency Regulations and withdrew it on on the

31st of October. The gazette would have made it illegal to report material “which pertains to any proposed operations or military activity as well as plans to buy equipment for security forces or the police”. Under the terms of those regulations, Editors could be jailed for up to five years for breaking the regulations, together with a fine not exceeding 50 dollars.

Joint statement by IFEX members

All 32 IFEX (International Freedom of Expression clearing house) members present at the International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX) General Meeting in Montevideo, Uruguay in October 2007 appealed to the government, the LTTE and all paramilitary and armed groups to support media freedom and the freedom of expression in a meaningful and sincere manner.

10th October: Press Freedom Forum on Sri Lanka held in the United Kingdom

A meeting was organised at the British House of Commons on Wednesday, 10 October 2007 by the Exiled Journalists Network (EJN). The event was co-hosted by Rt Hon. Andy Love MP, Secretary of the “All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Sri Lanka”. Ms. Michelle Stanistreet, President, National Union of Journalists, UK and Ireland chaired the meeting. Speakers included Sunanda Deshapriya of the **Sri Lanka Free Media Movement**, Tamil News Manager for ABC Radio Network Nadaraja Kuruparan and others from Amnesty International, the International Press Institute and the World Editors Forum.

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