

Government-orchestrated threats against exile journalists

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Reporters Without Borders deplores a government-orchestrated campaign of threats and smears against journalists and human rights activists that is being waged above all through media controlled by Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL), a state-owned company better known as “Lake House.”

The targets include Rohitha Bashana Abeywardane of Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka, a Reporters Without Borders partner organization, Dharmasiri Lankapeli of the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions and Sunanda Deshapriya, a journalist and media freedom activist.

“The UN Human Rights Council has just passed a resolution urging the government to prosecute those responsible for war crimes during the civil war between the armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which officially ended in 2009, but meanwhile many journalists in Sri Lanka and in exile are the targets of threats and an unprecedented hate campaign,” Reporters Without Borders said.

“Lake House, which controls many newspapers, is using accusations of terrorism, separatism and collaborating with the LTTE as a weapon to undermine those who defend freedom of information and media freedom.

“We urge UN high commissioner for human rights Navi Pillay, who says she is ready to go to Sri Lanka, to address the situation of all those who defend freedom of information and media freedom, both inside the country and abroad. Ending these threats must be included in the ‘global action plan’ which the Human Rights Council resolution wants the government to implement in order to advance national reconciliation.”

Threats against freedom of information activists

Attacks against Sri Lankan journalists have increased in recent months. In one of the latest cases, Sunanda Deshapriya had to be extricated by police in Geneva on 19 March when demonstrators opposed to the proposed Human Rights Council resolution objected to his filming them and became aggressive.

In a joint statement yesterday relayed by Reporters Without Borders, many journalists, human rights activists and media defence NGOs such as the Free Media Movement urged the government “to take immediate action to stop these attacks and ensure the safety of human rights defenders whether

they engage in national level processes and/or in inter-governmental processes such as the UN Human Rights Council.”

Propaganda

Defenders of freedom of the media and information are being accused of terrorism by the smear campaign that the government-controlled media have been waging since the start of the year.

Lawyers for Democracy condemned the state-run Independent Television Network’s propaganda in a statement on 21 March, accusing ITN of “branding journalists and civil society representatives as terrorists and traitors” for participating in the Human Rights Council session in Geneva.

On 11 and 24 January, the ITN programme “Vimasuma” accused several journalists of collaborating with Tamil exile groups. At the same time, an article in the Lake House-owned newspaper Dinamina accused one of the organizers of the “Black January” media freedom campaign in Colombo of links with the LTTE. The organizer singled out was Dharmasiri Lankapeli of the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU).

Dharmasiri Lankapeli

Following FMETU-organized protests on 4 and 6 July 2011 against the suppression of media trade unions within Lake House, leaflets were circulated by Lake House in July and November accusing Lankapeli of supporting the LTTE and participating in anti-government activities.

The programme “Vimasuma” renewed its attacks on 1 February with a report about the “Black January” campaign that highlighted Lankapeli’s role and accused its participants of not recognizing LTTE atrocities.

A representative of the Lake House journalists’ union, Lankapeli has for years been combating media freedom violations in Sri Lanka. He has been the target of threats and smears since 2007 and was forced to spend several months in hiding in 2009 and 2010.

On 28 February, Reporters Without Borders published a timeline of cases of violence, threats and propaganda against journalists and media defenders during the first two months of the year that showed the lack of progress for freedom of information. Blocking of access to websites, especially those based abroad, has also increased since the end of 2011.

Sri Lanka is ranked 163rd out of 179 countries in the 2011-2012 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index and is classified as a country “under surveillance” in the “Enemies of the Internet” report.

P.S.

Reporter Without Border

<http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-government-orchestrated-threats-23-03-2012,42179.html>