

**Professionalism, Peace Reporting and Journalists' Safety
in Sri Lanka**

**An Exiled Journalists' Network Report
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This report was supported by the Open Society Institute

March 2008

The Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN)

The EJN (www.exiledjournalists.net) is a ground-breaking organisation set up to provide support to journalists from all over the world who fled to the UK to escape persecution because of their media work. Run by and for exiled journalists, the EJN is the first of its kind anywhere in the world, and aims to promote press freedom as well as assisting both asylum seeking and refugee journalists.

EJN was officially launched as an independent organisation in October 2005. It was set up with the help of The MediaWise Trust, a Bristol-based media ethics charity. Its Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Media (RAM) Project had been engaging exiled journalists in the promotion of fair and accurate coverage since 1999. The National Union of Journalists (UK and Ireland) also supports EJN. Its current Co-ordinator is Forward Maisokwadzo, a journalist from Zimbabwe.

EJN patrons include Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, journalist and commentator; Richard Dowden, Journalist and Director of the Royal African Society; Lindsey Hilsum, Channel 4 News' China bureau chief and Tim Lezard, former President of NUJ.

Published by the Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN) and The MediaWise Trust

ISBN: 978-1-906157-02-9



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Registered charity: 1076002
Limited company registered in England: 3747192

Cover design by Russell Prothero

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Introduction



This conference report describes an initiative in the United Kingdom by the Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN) to expand dialogue and engagement around global issues of press freedom. Our aim was not to come up with specific policy recommendations or settled opinions but to spark ideas and inspire action.

Journalists in Sri Lanka face a plethora of problems and there is a growing need to highlight their deteriorating safety conditions. EJN, like many other press freedom campaign organisations, is deeply concerned about the Sri Lankan government's sluggish pace in addressing these problems despite the killing of numerous journalists and many examples of journalists being arrested, abducted, assaulted, denounced as traitors, 'disappeared' and receiving death threats.

With these challenges in mind, around 200 people gathered at two events in Parliament buildings and a journalists' club in London to discuss what more can be done to reduce both the pressures on the media and the increasing fears for the safety of journalists, particularly those operating in the embattled north and east of Sri Lanka. In Jaffna peninsula, dozens of journalists are said to have been forced to stop working for fear of their safety.

This was an 'open' Forum and succeeded in attracting a wide range of people, representatives of a diversity of political views concerning Sri Lanka. Lively, but good-natured interventions prevailed. The presentations successfully drew the participants into productive and sincere engagement with each other and the issues. However it also stimulated some disturbing exchanges, particularly on the internet, which highlighted both the dangers faced both by journalists and anyone else who speaks out against a 'dominant consensus', and the risks attached to instant globalised communications. In a postscript to the Forum events we have described some examples.

However this report is primarily a record of the Forum, a briefing for non-governmental organisations, civil society and media agencies, and a catalyst for further interventions in support of a just and stable society in Sri Lanka. Gleaned from the presentations and contributions from the floor, the following represents a summary of the issues that preoccupied the participants.

Sri Lankan people need to take the lead in resolving the issues affecting their country but they require support from elsewhere. Consequently, there were calls for:

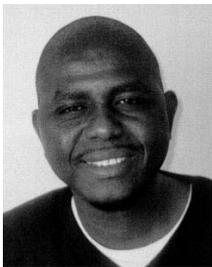
- the international media to keep Sri Lanka under the spotlight;
- an end to impunity by conducting proper investigations;
- the state controlled media to be converted into a form of Public Service Broadcasting;
- journalists to maintain professionalism and abide by international standards of journalism;
- the government to create a conducive media environment for journalists;
- all parties to respect the right to free speech and media freedom;
- the UN to take a more leading role in the peace process.

The range and flow of information in Sri Lanka is far too restricted. An open democracy requires free and widespread communications. Any political settlement must therefore include provisions that allow the people of Sri Lanka to transmit and receive diverse views.

The event and this report is part of our continuing Press Freedom Forum series. We look forward to working again with those people who came to the conference, who read this report and who campaign for press freedom and human rights issues. We hope you find what follows illuminating.

Forward Maisokwadzo, EJN Co-ordinator

Executive Summary



The right to freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is fundamental to building strong democracies, promoting mass civic participation in governance and the rule of law, and encouraging human development, peace and security. Yet, journalists, who are duty bound to take the lead in the exercise of this freedom in the public interest, continue to face repression ranging from death, kidnapping, arbitrary arrests, detentions and protracted prison terms to varying forms of censorship.

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of journalists killed or kidnapped, especially in countries engulfed in conflicts. The International News Safety Institute (INSI) 'counts more than 1,000 journalists and other news media staff who have died trying to cover the news around the world over the past 10 years.' What is even worse, INSI notes, is that 'the vast majority were local journalists working in peace time in their own countries, murdered by criminal elements trying to silence free and open reporting.'

The hardest hit countries are Iraq, Sri Lanka and Somalia. An international fact-finding mission to Sri Lanka in June 2007 reported that journalists in that country are 'increasingly worried about their safety and the government has done little to protect them - even further endangering their lives'. Comprising five press freedom and media development organisations, including the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), International Press Institute (IPI) and Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontieres, RSF), the delegation found that 8 months after their first mission in December 2006, safety issues were more important than at any stage in the past year and half.

An increasing number of journalists were killed, kidnapped, arrested, assaulted and threatened - especially in conflict zones in the north and east. Most recently, Subash Chandrabos of the Tamil monthly *Nilam*, and Selvarajah Rajivarman of the Tamil *Uthayan* newspaper were murdered in April 2007 in government-controlled areas. Although a special police unit was set up to investigate threats and disappearances, the mission saw little to demonstrate that action against impunity had been taken. Government ministers have been openly hostile to journalists - attacking them verbally, jeopardizing their safety as well as their families, and helping to create a climate of self-censorship, the delegation found.

Not long before his murder on 31 May 2004, the award-winning correspondent Aiyathurai Nadesan, who was based in Batticaloa in the eastern part of the country, had told RSF: "We are always caught in the cross fire. It is very hard for us to check our information with both the security forces and the Tamil Tigers. And when a local news article is released from Colombo, we may face reprisals in the field."

RSF notes that Nadesan's statement attests to how difficult working conditions are for journalists in Sri Lanka. Yet in its 2004 special report on the situation in the country, the Paris-based press freedom organisation noted that the polarisation of the country's media workers along ethnic and religious lines, leading to an increase in the exchange of hate messages in the news discourse, constituted a major constraint to the observance of journalistic professionalism and, by extension, an increasing danger to their safety.

In a report published in 2003, Sanjana Hattotuwa of the Centre for Policy Alternatives wrote: "Many newspaper staff perceives ethnicity as immutable and innate...The media in Sri Lanka often exacerbate existing communal and ethnic tensions by playing on the nationalist and religious emotions of the people".

RSF has called for the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka, set up in October 2003, to be given 'investigative and punitive powers that can be applied against media which transmit hate messages'. The organisation also appealed to publishers and editors-in-chief to operate according to international journalism code of ethics and to draw up a national code of ethics with the consensus of all journalists' organisations, rejecting any incitement to violence.

While attempts have been made by RSF and other press freedom campaign organisations to intensify international pressure on the Sri Lankan authorities to improve the press freedom climate in the country, little has been done by way of sensitising public opinion on the question of the rampant killing and kidnapping of journalists with impunity, or of engaging the media workers themselves on issues of journalistic professionalism, such as avoiding the exchange of hate messages on ethnic, religious or party lines in the context of peace reporting.

It was in this context that the Exiled Journalists' Network focussed its second annual Press Freedom Forum on the topic: *Professionalism, Peace Reporting and Journalists' Safety in Sri Lanka*. The 2007 forum resonates with the pilot organised on *Public Order, State Security and Press Freedom in Ethiopia: Towards finding a Common Ground* in September 2006.

The 2007 event, like its predecessor, brought together stakeholders and actors who are involved in efforts to improve the situation of press freedom in Sri Lanka, as well as some media workers in the country, to discuss how to improve journalistic professionalism, peace reporting and journalists' safety in Sri Lanka. It was our hope that this would serve as an important framework for future projects by press freedom campaigners, media development organisations, international and local policy makers, and above all local media practitioners.

Dr Ibrahim Seaga Shaw
Press Freedom Forum Series

Transcription:

**PROFESSIONALISM, PEACE REPORTING AND JOURNALISTS' SAFETY
IN SRI LANKA**

**Attlee Room, Portcullis House, House of Commons, Westminster
Thursday 10 October 2007**



Welcome Address from Andy Love MP, Secretary of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sri Lanka:

Moderator Michelle Stanistreet, President of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ, UK and Northern Ireland) apologized on behalf of Andy Love MP for not being able to make it to the event, and read out his message:

I am delighted to sponsor the Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN) meeting this morning. I would also like to sincerely apologise for not being there in person.

I would like to congratulate the EJN on the vital and groundbreaking work it does in helping protect journalists who face persecution and harassment because of their trade. The freedom of the Press is something that we take for granted in this country, and it's saddening to hear that such freedom is not enjoyed by journalists all over the world. EJN provides an invaluable service in assisting exiled journalists, and I am proud to give it my wholehearted support and backing.

As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sri Lanka, I have been involved in working with this country for years. Tragically, the political situation there remains bleak, with human rights' violations on all sides increasing. The peace process has stalled and all initiatives and momentum seemingly lost.

The situation in Sri Lanka does not receive enough attention from the international community, which seems to have really taken its eye off the ball in terms of working towards resolving the peace process. The international community needs to play a much stronger role in helping to bring all parties together to re-establish a ceasefire and set up a dialogue, which would in turn lead to subsequent negotiations. I believe that we need to ask ourselves if there should be a more leading role for the UN in this process. It is only by keeping the situation in Sri Lanka in the spotlight that we will be able to work towards the peaceful solution that this country so urgently requires.



Michelle Stanistreet: I would like to take this opportunity to extend my warm thanks to Andy Love on behalf of everybody here for taking the time to send this important message. I am very pleased to be here today for a very important debate about the grave situation in Sri Lanka. As a journalist myself and President of the NUJ, which represents almost 40,000 journalists here in the UK and Ireland, I can only imagine what it is like to work in an environment where journalists experience threats and come under immense pressure on a daily basis, where violence and even death is the reward for simply trying to do your job professionally and with integrity. This is the situation facing journalists in Sri Lanka.

Over 100 media workers are killed around the world every year - in Sri Lanka more than 15 journalists have been killed in the last few years alone. Today's meeting is a vital step in

tackling the very real problem of media freedom in Sri Lanka. We have got an impressive line up of speakers from human rights organisations, and journalists from Sri Lanka. I hope that what emerges out of the discussions, especially in the area of professionalism, would form the basis of any tangible help people here can provide to improve the situation of our colleagues in Sri Lanka. For this morning's session we have two sets of panels; I will introduce the first panel then take some questions and comments from the floor, then we'll take the second panel and hopefully have some time left for more questions and comments at the end. But first let me bring in the Chair of the Exiled Journalists' Network, Mohammed Elsharif to give an opening overview.



Mohammed Elsharif, Chair, Exiled Journalists' Network: On behalf of the Management Committee and members of the Exiled Journalists' Network, I welcome you all today. I start by giving you some background about the EJNI. It was established in October 2005 and now has around 200 members. These are journalists who come from different parts of the world having experienced very grave human rights violations for simply doing their job. The main objectives of the organisation are to support exiled journalists in the UK, and promote press freedom all over the world. And so, part of the idea of today's event on Sri Lanka is to create a press freedom platform to protect our colleagues who come to the UK.

We have two projects that we are working on at the same time: one is the Press Freedom House which we will use to house new exiled journalists who come to the UK fleeing persecution and provide them with much needed support to continue their profession.

We also want to follow up this event by establishing a Press Freedom Desk; to follow up all the recommendations coming from the Press Freedom Forum Series on different countries. The first forum we organised last year was on the press freedom situation in Ethiopia which was well attended and successful. And so this is the second event we are organising in this Press Freedom Forum Series. Some Ethiopian journalists who had suffered long imprisonment were released soon after our forum on that country and so we are hoping again this time around that some positive outcomes may emerge out of this year's forum. I want to take this opportunity to thank all the people who have come to participate in this meeting. I extend thanks to all partner organisations, especially to MP Andy Love for making this room available to us.

FIRST PANEL

Moderator: I now call on the first panellist Sunanda Deshapriya, a journalist from Sri Lanka and convener of the Sri Lanka-based Free Media Movement.



Sunanda Deshapriya, Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka: I will centre my presentation on the following: political-military context; government media strategy; the result; how do we face it/what do we do; and a way out.

In terms of the political-military context, no ceasefire agreement is in place and so as military operations between the government and rebels roll on, the human rights violations continue unabated. And with the government on the war path, it has intensified its anti-human rights campaign. The government's media strategy is not helping the situation - the media are constantly called upon to take the government's side in its fight against 'terrorism'; they face censorship on national security matters regulated by the Media Centre for National

Security; criticisms or exposures of wrongs or weaknesses committed by the government or military are not allowed as they are labelled as acts of traitors; and human rights and peace campaigns are labelled 'pro-terrorist agendas'. Thus the case is made for a tough media policy as you can see in the President's speech to the nation on 7 December 2006:

"At this decisive moment I wish to make one request of you. I ask this of all political parties, all media, and all people's organizations. You decide whether you should be with a handful of terrorists or with the common man who is in the majority. You must clearly choose between these two sides. No one can represent both sides at any one time".

According to this new media policy, there is no middle ground for the media, you either support the government or you risk being labelled as a 'terrorist' journalist. In fact all those like us who preach about the ideals of free media and human rights are quickly branded as terrorists. The President told the heads of media institutions on 29 March 2007 in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo:

"The Government has granted full freedom to the media. But whatever profession we do, we should have a country to live in. Therefore we should always give priority to our country ... I request all media institutions not to criticise our Security Forces, undermining their morale. (The) Media should not highlight the lapses of our Security Forces which may be advantageous to the enemy."

A special message posted on the Defence Ministry website on 23 February 2007 at 12:47:47 blasted what they called the "duplicitous of free media and human rights champions":

"Now the Rajapaksa Government is all-out to get rid of LTTE terrorism from our soil, the same very champions of 'human rights', 'free media', 'abduction', 'disappearance' etc. have started their usual game via media and through street demonstrations."

The government always sees and presents the media as supporters of the terrorists and therefore enemies of the nation. Government campaign posters released by the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT) were, in February 2007, all over the place in Colombo, with messages such as: "PEACE TIGERS, MEDIA TIGERS, LEFTIST TIGERS, IDENTIFY THEM, DESTROY THEM AND SAVE THE NATION." But LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Tiger rebels) sympathizers in the south raised their voice against the NMAT poster campaigns.

The journalists are caught up in the middle as it is difficult to tell the terrorist from the common man who serves as the source and consumer of information. Anybody who promotes the ideals of free media and human rights is called an 'LTTE terrorist'. It is indeed a very dangerous situation not only for journalists but for free media campaigners like us. Because of this, journalists are called all sorts of names by the authorities as you can see from this quote from Government Minister Champika Ranawaka of Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU):

"Who are these media people in Sri Lanka at the moment? Media people are those bastards who betray the country to the Tigers while parading as anti-war activists... We need to crush these bastards, if posters cannot do it, we have to find ways to do it."

A recent case was the one involving Defence correspondent Mr. Iqbal Athas in Jaffna, who was accused of: "pandering to the needs of a ruthless terrorist outfit built on extreme communalism". The Defence authorities claimed in October 2007 that "Mr. Athas' recent work raises doubts whether he has been assisting in the psychological operations of the LTTE terrorists."

The situation has been pretty much the same in the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) controlled territory, especially in Vanni. The LTTE have also never allowed dissent or freedom of expression. It has its own newspapers, radio, satellite TV and websites; their message to the media was to support the struggle and the LTTE; Tamil language media in general supports Tamil nationalism, and rarely criticizes the LTTE; and there is no independent media discourse on related issues in LTTE held areas and its spheres of influence.

The results have been bad news for journalists and the media in Sri Lanka. There have been pressures from both sides of the conflict on the media to take sides. In the last two years we have documented 11 journalists killed, plus many assaulted, intimidated, threatened and labelled as traitors. Three newspapers and one website have been closed.

Among journalists killed in the last two years alone are:

- **Nilakshan Sahadevan** - Killed: 1 August 2007
- **Selvarajah Rajivarman** - Killed: 29 April 2007
- **Subash Chandrabos** - Killed: 16 April 2007
- **Sampath Lakmal de Silva** - Killed: 2 July 2006
- **Subramaniam Sugirdharajan** - Killed: 24 January 2006
- **Dharmeratnam Sivaram** - Killed: 29 April 2005

And others abducted:

- **Nadarajah Kuruparan** - Abducted & Released: 28 August 2006
- **Pakkiyanathan Vijayashanthan** (*alias Vijayan*) - Abducted & Released: 18 May 2007
- **Subramaniam Ramachandran** - Abducted: 15 February 2007

Media freedom is getting worse particularly in Jaffna which has become one of the most dangerous places for journalism in the world. Here, field or on-the-spot coverage has long ceased to be the norm with editors constantly confined to their offices; editorial staff curtailed; the military calling the shots on the dos and don'ts; an embargo on newsprint; and restrictions placed on Colombo-based Tamil media outlets.

In the troubled eastern part of the country the story is the same, with Batticaloa deserted by experienced journalists and Tamil provincial journalists abandoning their profession.

Some recent cases of imprisonment and other forms of persecution by the government authorities in Colombo include: Munusami Parameshwari of the Tamil *Mawbima* newspaper which has since been closed; Iqbal Athas, Associate Editor, *Sunday Times*, fled the country and has only recently returned; Champika Liyanaarachchi, Editor, *Daily Mirror*; Lasantha Wickramatunga, Editor, *The Sunday Leader*. The government has also imposed media restrictions such as reintroducing Criminal Defamation Law and other emergency regulations censoring the media, and above all, blocking the TamilNet. The problem is journalists are not allowed to express their independent points of view; according to the authorities there are only two ways to look at it - from the government or rebel side.

And so what have we been doing to cope with all these problems? The Free Media Movement (FMM), of which I happen to be a founding member, has been working closely with other stakeholding media organisations in Sri Lanka and overseas in mounting campaigns and pursuing other means of bringing pressure to bear on the authorities and rebels. Our local partners include Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) Federation of Media Employees Trade Union (FMETU) Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF), Sri Lanka Tamil Journalists Alliance (SLTJA), etc. while our activities include advocacy, press freedom alerts, annual press freedom reports, safety programmes and promoting professionalism in journalism.

I want to conclude with what I think should be the way forward for the media in Sri Lanka:

- end impunity by conducting proper investigations;
- end unofficial censorship;
- make state media Public Service Broadcasting; and
- restore the right to information.

I thank you very much for your attention.



Nadarajah Kuruparan, News Manager, ABC Radio Tamil Service: I would like to start by saying that for my own personal protection I would like to avoid making any direct reference to my kidnap experience last year in Colombo. As you all know I live and work in Sri Lanka and I will be going back to continue my work after this conference without having to worry too much about my safety after that dreadful experience. My contribution will focus on the media situation in Sri Lanka in the context of peace reporting and professionalism rather than the documentation of the killings and other persecution of journalists which I think has been exhaustively handled here by my colleague Sunanda.

It is true that the media landscape has developed in Sri Lanka in recent years in terms of technology, which has boosted media pluralism that is now making it possible for journalists to carry out their functions in their respective languages, as well as according to their respective ethnic and religious orientation. What is lacking, however, or just ignored, is journalism ethics. Journalism is now functioning within limited circles of conflicts and contradictions where the reader gets the very opposite versions of a single incident in different media.

During the early years of the civil war, the media focused more or less on the differences of the main ethnic groups - the Sinhalese and the Tamils. However, following the expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna in 1990, religious differences began to feature prominently in the news. The presentation of news became largely influenced by the ethnic and religious differences of the journalists. Several Sinhala language media justified Sinhala nationalism while several Tamil media justified Tamil nationalism. Although most Muslims are Tamils, the situation made some of them develop their own form of 'Muslim nationalism' with which most Muslim journalists identify. The situation is even worse today, and is reducing prospects of quick end to the country's civil war. The consequence of this media polarization along ethnic and religious lines has been the denial of the public access to correct and balanced news.

Another serious problem of media professionalism which is affecting peace reporting is the very close links that exist between the media and political parties, or private companies. This is a questionable and challenging feature in terms of neutrality in news casting. The commercialized media feed on sensational news to which they make the people become addicted. If there is a single story without war-related issues such as killings, kidnappings, blasts, bodies etc then the news feature is nothing for the reader or listener. If a person asks another, "What is in today's newspaper or in the newscast on the radio or television?" and the other replies "Nothing" or "Nothing in it", it means there is no news about killings, dead bodies or blasts. So, as you can see the solution to the problem is multi-dimensional.

However, the constant dilemmas journalists face with regards to their work and safety make it difficult for them to follow their professional ethics. The warring factions are maximizing their efforts to utilize the power of mainstream media in favour of their activities. They are well aware of the need and importance of conditioning them in favour of their activities.

Thus journalists are in a vulnerable position and become easy prey of the current situation. The labelling as 'terrorists' is a particularly painful experience for Tamil journalists. The experience and pain of this is beyond the power of words to express.

The learning-by-doing approach in a chaotic situation without legal support increases the vulnerability of the Tamil journalists. I wish to raise the place of journalists from minority or marginalized communities in an oppressive situation as an issue for discussion in order to find the ways and means of strengthening and empowering them to handle the situation.

The need of the hour is providing them with opportunities to discipline themselves professionally and academically in order to handle the situation effectively and positively.



David Dadge, Deputy Director, International Press Institute, Vienna: I would like to talk about professionalism in the Sri Lankan media. The title of my speech is "The Sri Lankan Media: A Plea for Solidarity". I should say that my speech only represents my impression of events in Sri Lanka.

Let me say that, based on my own experiences, the Sinhalese, English and Muslim media often appear to operate in separate silos providing, in essence, information solely to their own communities. As a result, there is little sense of solidarity among the Sri Lankan media profession as a whole. I think it is incredibly important for all of Sri Lanka's media community to work together to expose the murderers of journalists and to repel the government's attempts to introduce repressive laws. They must speak with one voice. A failure to do so will only play into the hands of the government, who can act divisively to force the media into their separate silos, and their separate communities. Such actions make it far easier for the government to manipulate the media.

Therefore, the media must ignore the partisanship, which is a problem, especially among the Colombo media. Indeed, there appears to be a total disconnect between events in Colombo and those outside of the city in the north and east. The consequence is that, regarding the murder of journalists, there appears to be no single, unified condemnation of these acts. For all intents and purposes, there exists a 'politics of separation' in Sri Lanka that prevents the media community from forcefully speaking with one voice.

When I visited Sri Lanka in June of this year, on an international fact-finding mission, we travelled from Colombo to the Ampara region on the east coast, and we spoke to the journalists there, who were often part-time. They did not have the necessary equipment; they lacked the technology to deliver their reports back to Colombo; and public officials distrusted them fearing that they might be transferring information to the parties to the conflict. When writing a report about our visit, we recommended that editors in Colombo must take the time to visit the districts to see what is happening to their district journalists. I think the Colombo editors must show a greater awareness of what is going on with their colleagues in the districts.

In conclusion, I think 'professionalism of the media' has a different meaning in countries of conflict. I think it demands a higher degree of solidarity and unity among the journalists. They have to speak with a single voice regarding some of the issues that confront the Sri Lankan media profession. After all, the murder of a Tamil journalist is purely and simply the murder of a journalist. The attack on one media organization is an attack on the media profession as a whole. Unfortunately there often appears to be little recognition of these facts among the media.



Bertrand Pecquirie, Director, World Editors Forum, Paris: The World Editors Forum is the organization of Editors-in-chief and other news executives within the World Association of Newspapers (WAN). The forum was created ten years ago.

I know a little about the media situation in Sri Lanka through the South Asian Free Media Association. Sri Lanka is of course not an exception in South Asia, a sub continent known for some of the most notorious conflicts, because journalists are also abducted and murdered in places such as Bangladesh, Kashmir and Maldives. And so the whole region is really a terrible place for journalists. What makes Sri Lanka somehow special is the kind of repressive national media policy. I have never seen this kind of media policy - that the media must protect national identity. The role of the media is to check government, be a watchdog, but in Sri Lanka the government wants it the other way round. It is really frustrating to see journalists abducted and killed for simply doing their job.

Take for example the war of words such as the use and misuse of the words 'terrorism' and 'terrorist'. Two years ago when you read the Colombo-based newspapers you see that these words were about specific activities, and not related to the Tamil community of the north. Now it has become a common word. There is a general perception that anybody who lives in the north is a 'terrorist'. And there is no single activity that you can identify with the common use of this word. For me when you are a journalist you have to be very careful using these words or other words that can provoke more problems; as a journalist you can be killed in such situations but you can also kill if you use these words. Today you call the rebels the LTTE of the north 'terrorists' but tomorrow you will have to negotiate with them. I will be going to Colombo in December to take part in a seminar on how to improve media professionalism and I hope to touch on this issue.

I would like to urge Sri Lankan journalists to create a national debate using new media, such as blogs, to talk with your audience or readers asking them whether you can use these words everywhere - for example, on the front page of the different newspapers at every occasion. Little effort is made by journalists to find out what is going on in the north largely because of the overuse of these 'terrorism' words. When you read the papers these days you only see one version - the government's version - and nothing more. One-version journalism is no journalism. Maybe Sunanda would correct me here but for me I don't see any progress in the coverage of issues by the Sri Lankan press. I would like to see a fair and balanced coverage of issues affecting everybody; I think that the fact that this is lacking is a lapse in democratic debate. The journalists must speak with one voice in condemning government's repressive media policy. I think using new media facilities like blogs is the best place to start to beat repression.

From the international point of view, I think it is necessary that we are there with these missions to assess the situation first hand and help our colleagues. This is what we have been trying to do at the World Editors Forum. It is a long term strategy through seminars and workshops, and I am sure building networks with international organizations to help improve the situation could well be part of that strategy.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM THE FLOOR

Gopal Gopiratnam, Editor, *Oru Paper* (bilingual Sri Lankan Newspaper) in London: I think the international media is not doing enough to highlight and expose the repressive media situation in Sri Lanka. Exposing what is going on in Sri Lanka in the international media will create awareness and pressure on the authorities to respect media freedoms.

N. Vijayasingam, former Adviser to the European Union: Historically, Sri Lanka had a Sinhalese press, a Tamil press and an English press; all three were subservient to either the government or the opposition parties, and they respected their views. Today the media are harvesting what they had sowed.

Yogan Yoganathan, Councillor, Kingston: We are talking about the many Sri Lankans trapped as internally displaced and as refugees. And even here in Britain while all this is going on, they try to suppress you. And the British media just keeps quiet. Is that the type of democracy we are looking for? This is a very beautiful forum and we need your help to bring up the issues. I have been living and working here for forty years but I have not forgotten about Sri Lanka; it is a very beautiful country. Why we cannot do something to change the situation I don't know. Since 2005 how many people have been killed including journalists; many, of course.

Arjuna Wickramasinghe, former Reuters Correspondent in Sri Lanka, now studying in Paris: My question is for Sunanda and David. One of the tools that the Sri Lanka government - whatever government is in power - uses to intimidate the electronic media in Colombo is the process of sending out the license to operate a television station which is heavily politicized. You will be up against so many bureaucratic bottlenecks and this license can be withdrawn when it suits the government. What has your organization the FMM been doing to overcome this?

REACTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

Sunanda Deshapriya: The problem is we don't have public service broadcasting in Sri Lanka. We engaged the government on this recently. But as it stands there is no immediate prospect that the government would ease these bottlenecks in the light of the new media policies that have just been introduced.

David Dudge: I will answer the question on how we can intensify pressure. I think there are many different levels. In essence the NGO community can publicize and ring the alarm bells about what is happening in Sri Lanka. I think we can set out recommendations and create resolutions about press freedom. But I have to say that much depends on the influence of the inter-governmental organizations and the countries that retain good relations with Sri Lanka.

We have to urge countries such as India and Japan to apply pressure on the Sri Lankan government to try and make them withdraw some of the repressive legal provisions.

Let me also say that the government of Sri Lanka cannot bear sole responsibility; the Tamil Tigers are equally to blame. There has to be recognition that all the parties to the conflict have been attempting to influence the flow of information. I really agree with the gentleman who said it is not only the issue of the media, but it is also how the public receives information about events in the country. Using this analogy, you quickly realise that there is little understanding among the Sri Lankan public about what the journalists are actually experiencing to bring them the news.

Mohammed Elsharif: Regarding the question of pressure, we are working towards setting up of a Press Freedom Desk at the Exiled Journalists' Network after this event to follow up on all these ideas that are emerging from the discussions.

Bertrand Pecquirie: I did not find a community of journalists in Colomba during my last visit. We need to find partners working together.

SECOND PANEL



Chandana Bandara, Senior Producer, BBC Sinhala service: I can remember in 1994 I was advised by somebody to cover not only the combat events of the conflict but also all those peace initiatives to end it, because as he put it, the idea is to bring peace to the country. I agreed.

Come 2005 the peace talks collapsed, both parties have since plunged into war again. Now the media prohibition is a big problem in the area of professionalism.

I am here (in the UK) working for the BBC earning a big salary and so I can ask myself what the hell do I care? Let me give you an example of how stories are covered. The present President had two leading members of his party, Mangara and Suribani, who broke away with an allegation that the President gave a million rupees to the Tamil Tigers in order to get the Tamil vote. The ruling party-owned Sinhala media went to great lengths to report the allegation but the Tamil media kept quiet. Then came the government version a couple of weeks later saying that it was not the government that gave the Tigers the money it was the opposition.

Most journalists were killed. Most were selling their stories to media outlets outside the country; they did not have proper training but they wanted to get the story out, and in the process ended up undergoing extreme hardship. And most end up being labelled as terrorists. Kuruparan, Sunanda, and even George Moore were labelled 'terrorists'. And so you other panellists beware because you too could be labelled 'terrorists'.

One other disturbing experience is that when a Japanese journalist is killed it is big news in the Western media but when a Sri Lankan journalist is killed it is no news. Moreover, Sri Lanka has trade union activities only in the public sector and nothing in the private sector and I think if we don't unionize I don't think we will be free. If there is no free journalist there would be no freedom.



Seyed Bazeer, Human Rights Lawyer and member of the Sri Lankan Muslim Community in London: The constitution provides for freedom of speech which includes publication. Human rights violations have been going on in Sri Lanka for a number of years. Just as under the regime of all the Sri Lankan leaders.

Martyn Lewis, a former BBC newsreader, once said: "We are very good as journalists at analyzing failure, but we are not so good at analyzing success"

Sunanda mentioned about the journalists killed in Colombo but he failed to mention the violations of human rights of others killed. Who killed them? And why this has not been reflected in this meeting today. What about other journalists killed, journalists like Relangi

Selvarajah and her husband, and Bala Nadarajah Iyer of *Thinamurasu*, a Tamil weekly. He was killed as well but nothing was said about him today. Is there any hidden agenda?

Another vexing problem is the way the media is being manipulated not to report about other human rights violations. We always talk about media freedom and democracy but when they killed people who stood for rights there, or who left the country? My photograph was published all over the place saying that I was an Al-Qaeda leader in Sri Lanka. I am a human rights lawyer but I am branded an Al-Qaeda leader by the pro-LTTE media when I criticize the LTTE. Hence our media freedom is also threatened here.



Yolanda Foster, South Asia Researcher for Amnesty International (AI), London: What I want to bring to this meeting is to look at the wider context that Sri Lanka is an example of an internal armed conflict, which has lasted for over 25 years, where there have been great violations of human rights by all parties to the conflict. I think the threats to freedom of expression are not actually new; we can go back and look at cases such as the killing of Richard de Zoysa, the killing of Mylvaganam Nimalarajan and that of Taraki Sivaram.

What is common about all these cases is that there has been impunity for the perpetrators. The investigations of these cases have been stalled and AI is very much concerned about this. If we look back at the last two years since Sri Lanka slid back to war, the country has witnessed a lot of threats to freedom of expression. 11 journalists have been killed in Sri Lanka in the last two years alone, and most of these killings are to do with the fact that these journalists were simply trying to do professional job of reporting the situation on the ground in the north and east. What we would like to see is investigations into those killings to fight impunity. AI will be launching a report early in 2008 looking at Freedom of Expression in Sri Lanka. We want to campaign for investigations into the killings of journalists. [*Sri Lanka: Silencing Dissent*, www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/001/2008]



Pearl Thevanayagam, Secretary, Exiled Journalists' Network: I think I have nothing to say because what I wanted to say has been said already. I am lost for words and so I would like to invite the Sri Lankan High Commission representative to say something in answer to some of the issues raised.



Mr P Samarasinghe, Counsellor, Sri Lanka High Commission, London: I will speak on behalf of the military in Sri Lanka because I was the military spokesman. I am now the Counsellor at the Sri Lanka High Commission.

I am not here to counter what others have said but I want to clarify certain points. First of all, regarding the military, there is no censorship in Sri Lanka. The new media policy Sunanda talked about is for now only a proposal. One other point I want to make is that there has been no talk of a Tamil terrorist - there is no talk like that - but there are Muslim terrorists; there are Tamil journalists but no Tamil terrorists.

All I know is that the relationship between the media and the military in the last two years has been good. When I was a military spokesman all journalists (Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim) used to contact me. There was no restriction. I think the media should help bring peace to Sri Lanka by not encouraging more fighting.

RESPONSES FROM THE FLOOR

Neville de Silva, Diplomatic Editor, *Asian Tribune*, London: This is a direct response to the contribution from the Sri Lanka High Commission Counsellor. If, as you said, dissenting voices are encouraged in Sri Lanka, why are there threats against journalists? Why are they trying to introduce new laws restricting the media? I think we need to be a little careful when we make these judgmental statements.

On the issue of the use of words and the question of citizen journalism that somebody took up, I think it is a very good idea; the only problem is that if you don't have access to people reporting from those areas, it is difficult to check your stories. Lack of equipment could well be another problem that hinders citizen journalism.

N. Vithyatharan, Editor, *Uthayan/Sudar Oli Newspapers*, Northern Sri Lanka: Our newspapers have witnessed a series of violent attacks in government controlled areas, and in most cases in close proximity to security forces, police camps and checkpoints. The reporter who wrote of the 5 youths killed on the beach in Trincomalee in January 2006 was killed and the photographer went into hiding. I take responsibility for putting the life of my reporter in danger. It was our photographs and report that contradicted the claim that they were killed due to the accidental explosion of a grenade carried by them.

RESPONSE FROM THE PANEL

Sunanda Deshapriya: We may have different opinions regarding the problems of the media in Sri Lanka but we need to engage with each other to improve the situation.

THE MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SRI LANKA
Media Talk at the Frontline Club, 13 Norfolk Place, London
Friday 11 October 2007

Opening address by EJN Secretary and London-based Sri Lankan journalist, Pearl Thevanayagam: Welcome all. We are proud to announce the Exiled Journalist's Network's second Press Freedom Forum Series. Last year we had the first on the press freedom situation in Ethiopia and this year we decided to have it on Sri Lanka. We thank the Frontline Club for supporting this event. The EJN is comprised of 200 exiled journalists in the UK, persecuted in their own countries all over the world. I hope you enjoy the meeting.

Moderator - George Arney, former BBC correspondent in Sri Lanka, journalist and presenter of the BBC World Service programme The World Today: Welcome to the Frontline Club. I was asked to moderate this dealing with two areas: an overview of the situation in Sri Lanka now and the journalistic difficulties in covering this situation. I was BBC correspondent in Sri Lanka in the mid-90s which perhaps explains why I have been asked to moderate this session.

I know that the ceasefire which went into force two years ago collapsed; I have got the impression the Tigers have lost ground fairly significantly especially in the east; the east has, over the past couple of years, been complicated by the emergence of the breakaway Tamil Tiger commander Colonel Karuna. So you have a three-way military situation going on in the east. I can't see any prospects of peace talks at the moment, and I have the feeling that the Colombo government, which seems to be quite a coalition government, is on the whole fairly hardline.

Doing a little bit of research for this over the past couple of days I have been a bit shocked to find out that things seem to be worse than I was anticipating. Talking recently to a colleague at the BBC, he was telling me that bodies are turning up and there are lots of disappearances and abductions. He said rather worryingly that he felt the situation is heading back as it was in 1988-89, which as you probably know, was the second uprising of the JDP. And the Tigers, I understand, are calling this phase 'the final war'. Now am I right to be severely depressed in terms of the possible peaceful resolution of the conflict?

Prof. Sumantra Bose, London School of Economics: The Sri Lankan conflict was in a strategic stalemate in 2001 and 2002. That situation has not changed. The war is still very much in a strategic stalemate. It is implausible for either side of the conflict to dream about achieving military victory. As you rightly pointed there is no prospect for this stalemate to be broken now or any time in the near future. And so what we are seeing is an outbreak of extreme nastiness if that is not too colloquial.

Sunanda Deshapriya, Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka: A government official was quoted yesterday as saying that a political solution is not possible through violent means. Human rights organizations like the UNHRC have made it quite clear that there are ethnic issues to be solved and that military victory is not going to take the government anywhere.

Nadarajah Kuruparan, News Manager, ABC Radio Tamil Service: Since the beginning of the war, to date every government thinks that a military solution is the only way out, but practically even the US Ambassador in Colombo last week reconfirmed that Sri Lanka's ethnic issues cannot be solved through military means.

Moderator: Juliana, when introducing yourself you mentioned that you think the government in Sri Lanka is pro-war. Would you like to justify this?

Juliana Ruhfus, former Al Jazeera International correspondent in Sri Lanka: Yes, of course. It is the government that believes that the conflict can be resolved through military means. They have gone into the east and they have conducted the war there, and they could probably say that they have won the war against the LTTE there and are now moving on to the north. And I guess the question that is being raised is, yes, the military campaign has been won but with the LTTE now driven underground, would there be more attacks in the future? Already there were two attacks on aircrafts in Colombo. And so it is not clear whether the LTTE is entering into another form of military resistance.

Moderator: I am told that 11 journalists have been killed in the last two years alone. Sunanda is the Convener of the Free Media Movement; would you like to give an overview of what the media situation is at the moment.

Sunanda: Journalists find themselves in a very difficult situation because the government keeps insisting that they take sides against the terrorists. Government uses this definition loosely. Yes, 11 journalists have been killed in the last two years, most of them Tamil journalists. In fact, Jaffna, the Tamil homeland, has been ranked as one of the most dangerous places for journalists in the world. Ninety percent of journalists in Jaffna have left the job. Three of their editors have been living in their offices in the last six months without going out. And all the sides of the conflict are involved in making the work of journalists in that region impossible. At least in Jaffna you have government military personnel. Newspaper circulation there has also plummeted from 23,000 to 5,000 partly due to newsprint embargo imposed by the government. Most Sinhala journalists who try to pursue the middle ground also find themselves in trouble. There is what we call the Sinhala-Tiger phenomenon. Whenever they give dissenting views, they are branded 'Tiger' journalists and, at worse, 'terrorists'. I have been branded 'Tiger journalist' many times.

Moderator: Kuruparan, I understand you yourself were abducted for a few days or so; I wonder if you could tell us a bit about your experience.

Kuruparan: Yes, I was abducted last year for over 23 hours and released but I don't want to say anything about it because I want to continue working as a journalist in Colombo. Most Tamil journalists are facing problems because they are generally branded pro-LTTE and anti-government. Our channel is no longer reporting any first-hand news from Jaffna from where our last reporter has since left. The media are divided along ethnic and religious lines: Sinhala media supports Sinhala nationalism, Tamil media supports Tamil nationalism while the Muslim media supports Muslim nationalism and so there is no unity among journalists.

Moderator: Juliana, can you give some perspectives on this because the international media have also been kept at bay; for instance, a Channel 4 team was allowed in Jaffna recently only to be expelled shortly after.

Juliana: This year I wasn't in the north, I was in the east, but I think one thing that is a fall-out that affects journalists beyond the killing of journalists is that there is climate of self-censorship. Anybody you speak to doesn't want to go on record and I found that quite extraordinary. Quite often local people are worried to go on record but in the east you cannot find an NGO - a Western NGO - that is prepared to decisively talk about what happened in Batticaloa, for instance, during the military campaign. We had lots and lots of the off-the-record interviews in the event.

Moderator: Let us now turn to the floor for questions and comments.

Andrew Kendel, former election monitor in Sri Lanka: I have a history with Sri Lanka going back to 1994, monitoring the last four national elections in the country. I have also been involved in consultancy work for Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Regarding my comment, it is not strictly an issue about the journalists; it is also about the NGO workers. There have been, depending on who you talk to, at least 40 NGO workers, all local, killed since the beginning of last year. So there is a very good reason why there is fear among NGO workers and why information is not coming out from them.

W. Segaram: During World War II, I do not think there were British journalists writing reports in favour of Germans, they were rather writing against the Germans and supporting the British. In wartime they would support their country; that is responsible journalism.

Moderator: That is an interesting point, that there is a war going on and you are saying that from the south's point of view, journalistic freedoms are restricted. It is an understandable point from that point of view.

Sothi Lingam, Sri Lankan journalist, London: We don't need to wait for the Americans to tell us that there would never be military victory. Now what we want to know gentlemen is this; this meeting is being held in London - we are addressing particularly the journalists from the international sphere. What on earth are you people going to do about this? You know the truth, you have been there and seen for yourself at first hand and you bloody well know the truth. You are the people who have to solve this problem and tell the world - people like Gordon Brown, George Bush, Tony Blair. I would like a cogent answer from you.

Helen Haran, former spokesperson of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM): I am quite glad with the point just made by this gentleman. I was working closely with journalists. From my point of view a lot of the conflict had to do with the reporting; most of the reporting was just wrong. We saw even when the conflict hadn't started, preparations were very much taking place in the papers. There was a war of words, and I would like to hear from the panel how much you think the actual reporting - actual bad influence of the journalists - had to do with the conflict. And I am very glad that this gentleman mentioned the international community because I would like to hear a bit more about this.

Moderator: So shall we have some response there, how far did the local media help prepare the ground for a return to conflict?

Sunanda: Well it is clear that the media is part of the conflict. If you read the Tamil and Sinhala media you will think that you are in two different countries. I agree with you that we never get fair coverage in Sri Lankan newspapers because there is no rational reporting, for example, on the work of Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission. The problem is to do with difference in language. Sinhalese can hardly read Tamil newspapers and vice versa. If we had one language newspapers we probably could have had newspapers playing a better role in bringing about peace.

Moderator: There was mention about the international media as well and I would like to know more.

Helen: I had a lot of interviews with the international media and I think the frustration has always been the under reporting of Sri Lanka, and we know that this is the case. Now on the issue of self-censorship, I think it is not only in the country that this has been going on; I think there is also an issue with the international media.

Ivan Pedropillai, Chairman, Tamil Writers: My point is that the media, particularly the international media, looks at the situation in Sri Lanka, and reports the conflict as if it is a boxing contest. That is not the long term thing that we are looking for. I would ask the international media to do an in-depth analysis. By just reporting the incidents without giving analysis you would be simply feeding the voyeuristic interests of Western people.

Moderator: I cannot speak for the international media but I should just point out again that there is a very serious issue of access. I am not allowed to go; I did a couple of stupid things in Sri Lanka. I was banned because I was so angry with the election that was manipulated back in 2000. I think generally the media do not treat Sri Lanka as important.

Juliana: My role is as a witness and I am not there to provide solutions. What I do is hopefully provide an analysis and go beyond the news.

Pearl: As a journalist in Sri Lanka, I covered the war from 1990 to 2001. My association with international journalists there is that I know there is censorship but BBC journalists have easy access to government officials. The problem is the attitude of foreign journalists, who have no local insight. When the tsunami happened, the east was the hardest hit but what was reported was Galle because journalists were holed up in hotels there.

AFTERMATH OF THE CONFERENCE

Although this report is all about what transpired during specific EJM events, it is important to report some of the immediate reactions to the events being held.

The examples below are indicative of the problems facing anyone who attempts to provide dispassionate or objective accounts of highly-charged social, political or military circumstances. They are also a reminder of the ways in which emotion and partisanship can distort facts, and put people's lives at risk.

Firstly, at exactly 3am morning on the day of the conference itself, EJM received an email from Mr Wimal Ediriwira, President of the Sri Lanka Centre in London making observations on 'Professionalism, peace reporting and journalists' safety in Sri Lanka,' the topic of the conference.

This is an unedited version of his email:

1. 'Exiled Journalists'

a. *There are NO exiled Sri Lankan journalists. No Sri Lankan journalists have been exiled by the current government of Sri Lanka.*

b. *Therefore, the holding of this forum under the auspices of the Exiled Journalists' Network (EJM) is yet one more snide deception and misleading of the world carried out by the minority-dominated and anti-Sri Lankan mass media in Sri Lanka, a member of whom is said to be a member of the Committee of the EJM.*

c. *The only journalist exiled from Sri Lanka was the renowned British journalist Paul Harris, who was forced out from Sri Lanka with just 24 hours' notice a few years ago by the fundamentally-undemocratic minority-Christian-dominated government of prime minister Mr Ranil Wickremasinghe, a Christian whose uncle was the Bishop of Kurunegala. (Population of Sri Lanka: Buddhists 79%, Christians 6%). Mr Harris was expelled from Sri Lanka for writing a completely factually correct article "The Biggest Giveaway in History", detailing the attempt of Mr Wickremasinghe's minority-Christian dominated-government to illegally hand over nearly one-third of the territory of Sri Lanka – the motherland of the Buddhist Sinhelas – to the Christian Tamil terrorists, in an attempt to carve out an East Timor-type Christian enclave out of this Buddhist country.*

d. *The fact that there is a fully free press in Sri Lanka under the present government is clearly evident by the open – as well as often unjustified and even virulent – criticism, by the variety of media organisations most of which are controlled by minority-dominated organisations, of the present government which, however, enjoys the confidence of most of the majority population.*

2. 'Professionalism'

It is ironical that one of the subjects of the forum on Sri Lanka is 'Professionalism' since this is one of the things most absent in the minority (including Christians) -dominated Sri Lankan media, members of whom are represented in this forum. For example:

a. *Despite the population of Sri Lanka being 79% Sinhela Buddhists, there are no known Sinhela Buddhists listed in the forum, though there are Sri Lankan Christians, Tamils and Muslims in it – hardly professionalism in action.*

b. During the entire 24 years of the Tamil terrorism, neither the Sri Lankan minority-dominated mass media, nor the world media who also reported on Sri Lanka during this period, ever mentioned the fact that the Tamil terrorists were Christians. As a result, the minority (including Christians) -dominated Sri Lankan media and the world media misled the world into believing that the Tamil terrorists were Hindus, giving an entirely different interpretation and gloss to the situation. This was not only unprofessional but was almost tantamount to a hoax and a fraud perpetrated on the world.

c. The minority-dominated Sri Lankan media also directly and indirectly distorted, and concealed from the world media and from the world at large, material facts about the Sri Lanka situation, resulting in the world being given – and continuing to be given – incorrect or distorted facts about Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan situation. A FAQs list is being sent along with this which gives the correct information about many aspects of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan situation to enable you to appreciate the extent of the inaccuracies and distortions disseminated by the minority (including Christians) -dominated Sri Lankan media. None of those facts have ever been published by the Sri Lankan media, as a result of which the world media – and the world itself – are unaware of those substantially different aspects of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan situation.

d. The unprofessionalism of the Sri Lankan media because of their control by the minorities (Christians, Tamils and Muslims) also extends to various other avenues:

i. The minority-dominated Sri Lankan media have always concealed the massive exploitation of the majority (79%) Buddhist population by the minorities or by the minority-controlled governments, as a result of which the indigenous majority Sinhela Buddhists have (among other things) half the per capita income of the minorities. For example, most of the biggest companies in Sri Lanka are Christian, Tamil or Muslim dominated and most of them openly discriminate against the majority Buddhist Sinhelas in employment as well as in trade. More than 70% of the land and more than 80% of the businesses in the administrative capital, Colombo, are owned by Tamils. The majority Sinhelas need many thousands of votes to send an MP to parliament, but (for example) in the last election, a Tamil MP was elected with just ELEVEN votes in all! Large numbers of Christian and Muslim places of worship are being put up indiscriminately and without any planning permission or relationship to the Christian or Muslim populations in the areas. Many Buddhists are in prison for bigamy, yet Muslims are permitted to have up to four wives. In the \$75 million Galle harbour expansion, more than 40% of the jobs were given to the 7% Muslims and 35% of the jobs to the 12% Tamils. For more than 15 years Buddhists were forcibly sterilised. For the past 30 years, Christian organisations have been permitted to go to the poorest villages and convert the people to Christianity by offering them relatively high sums of money if they trample and destroy Buddhist statues and pictures. Etc. etc. None of these stories have been exposed by the media in Sri Lanka because of the control of the media by the minorities

ii. In this Buddhist country, any excuse is used by the minority (including Christian) -dominated Sri Lankan media to disparage Buddhism or the Buddhist clergy. Any minor misconduct by a Buddhist monk is blown up to scandal, or higher, levels, and even stories are blatantly invented. Yet similar cases of misconduct by Christian priests are covered up and the Sri Lankan media have still not reported that over one billion dollars have been paid by the Catholic Church in the US as compensation to people sexually abused as children by Catholic priests.

iii. Incidents where Buddhist monks or their temples have been attacked by Christians have been concealed.

iv. Prior to elections, the minority-dominated Sri Lankan media have blatantly published with impunity distortions, lies and exaggerations to discourage the population from voting for political parties pledged to reducing the level of exploitation of the Buddhist Sinhala majority population.

v. Letters written to the media by Buddhists protesting against discrimination, attacks by Christians, destructions of Buddhist temples, forcible seizure of Buddhist temple lands etc. have not been given space in the mass media, while anti-Buddhist letters and articles are regularly given space.

e. The following item (3. Peace Reporting) also lists another instance of the un-professionalism of the minority (including Christians) - dominated Sri Lankan media – the hoax perpetrated on the world by the minority (including Christians) -dominated Sri Lankan media relating to the so-called 'Peace reporting'.

3. 'Peace Reporting'

a. The use of the term 'peace' and the demand for peace talks, in the context of the Tamil terrorism – in which more than 70,000 people, mostly Buddhist Sinhelas, were brutally murdered in Sri Lanka by the terrorists – are deliberate inconsistencies intended to minimise the gravity of the crimes.

b. Yet, in no major country – US, UK, Japan, or any European country – have the governments offered to have peace talks with terrorists. Indeed, in the US the Oklahoma bomber whose bomb killed 54 people was expeditiously executed and, in the UK, Ethiopian Hussain Osman was jailed for 40 years for his part in the failed bomb plot of 21st July 2005.

c. Yet, in Sri Lanka, the minority (including Christians)-dominated Sri Lankan media have endlessly published stories promoting 'peace talks' with the Tamil terrorists who murdered more than 70,000 people in Sri Lanka, most of them Buddhist Sinhelas, because the terrorists are Christians and the victims are Buddhists. It is, apparently, not a crime to murder Buddhists. Indeed, to date not even a single Tamil terrorist has been charged with terrorism or murder.

*For further information, please contact The Sri Lanka Centre, P O Box 717, London W5 3EY
President: (Mr) Wimal Ediriwira Tel: 07742 478 727 Email: sinhalacentre@yahoo.com*

PUBLICITY

When organising events such as the EJM Forum, publicity is all important. This year's forum received a fair amount of print, online and broadcast coverage. However, one article published by the *Sri Lankan Guardian* on 12 October 2007 showed the crying need to discuss issues of 'professionalism, peace reporting and journalists' safety' in Sri Lanka. Below is an unedited version of the article.

Exiled Journalists Network meeting held at House of Commons in London By Kausalya Rajanaiyagam

A meeting was organised at the British House of Commons on Wednesday, 10 October 2007 by the Exiled Journalists Network (EJM). The event was co-hosted by Rt Hon. Andy Love MP, Secretary of the "All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Sri Lanka". The meeting was chaired by Ms. Michelle Stanistreet, President, National Union of Journalists, UK and Ireland.

The members of the panel of speakers were as follows:

Sunanda Deshapriya, Convener, Free Media Movement on Sri Lanka & Head of Media Unit, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo.

Nadaraja Kuruparan, News Manager (Tamil) ABC Radio Network, Sri Lanka.

Chandana Keerthi Bandara, Senior Producer, BBC Sinhala service.

Pearl Thevanayagam, EJN Secretary, Sri Lankan journalist.

David Dudge, Deputy Director, International Press Institute, Vienna.

Bertand Pecquieriem Director, World Editors Forum, Paris.

Seyed Bazeer, Human Rights Lawyer, Sri Lankan Muslim Information Centre, UK.

Yolanda Foster, Researcher Sri Lanka and Nepal, Amnesty International.

Tom Porteous, Director, Human Rights Watch, London.

Mohammed Elsharif, Chair of the EJN.

Members of various Sri Lankan political parties attended the meeting including Nesan Shankar Raji of (EROS) and members of the Campaign for Peace and Unity in Sri Lanka (CPUSL). Sunanda Deshapriya, Convener, Free Media Movement on Sri Lanka & Head of Media Unit, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo was highly critical of the government of Sri Lanka and attacked the Rajapakse Administration over their negligence in investigating the killings and kidnappings of so many Sri Lankan journalists. He went into great lengths to highlight the plight faced by journalists in Sri Lanka using a power point presentation with the identities of journalists killed in Sri Lanka and some photos of those that were killed.

Sunanda Deshapriya labelled the EPDP and TMVP as parties responsible for the abductions and killings of some of the journalists. Nadaraja Kuruparan, News Manager, ABC Radio Network too was highly critical of the government of Sri Lanka and spoke of the suffering faced by the journalists by the Sri Lankan government and military. What I could not understand is that neither Sunanda Deshapriya or Nadaraja Kuruparan are exiled journalists. One can only assume that they had received payments from the LTTE to come over to London and speak about the plight of journalists in Sri Lanka. The Editor of the Udhyam paper too was highly critical of the government and the Sri Lankan military and spoke how the papers offices had been ransacked by the EPDP with the assistance of the Sri Lankan army where two of his staff members were killed. The Editor of the Udhyam paper flew top London with the financial assistance of the LTTE and was accompanied by LTTE agents to the House of Commons.

"Gang of Four" Councillor Yogarajah of the London Borough of Kingston too was highly critical of the government of Sri Lanka. One cannot be too surprised as he is a hard-core supporter of the LTTE and actively raises funds for their terrorist cause in Sri Lanka. I seemed to get the impression that this meeting was orchestrated with the assistance of the LTTE for their own agenda and propaganda. The Exiled Journalists Network (EJN) were not critical of the LTTE and hardly spoke of the LTTE's hand in the killings, disappearances and abductions of journalists in Sri Lanka including their hands in the killing of Sivram Taraki and Balanadaraja Iyer of (EROS) who worked as a journalist. The only person to really attack the EJN and question the reasons as to why the LTTE were not highlighted or spoken about when it came to the killings of journalists in Sri Lanka was Seyed Bazeer of the Sri Lankan Muslim Information Centre, London.

Towards the end of the discussion Pearl Thevanayagam, EJN Secretary, invited representatives of the Sri Lankan High Commission to defend the dubious allegations that were made by members of the EJN and panel against the Sri Lankan government and military.

Continued.....

Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe, the new Military Attaché to the Sri Lankan High Commission was quick to defend the Government of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan military and clearly stated that the Sri Lankan military had no interests in intimidating journalists and have in no way taken part in the killings.

The International Press Freedom Mission to Sri Lanka which was led by Ms. Michelle Stanistreet, President, National Union of Journalists, UK and Ireland and David Dudge, Deputy Director, International Press Institute, Vienna with the assistance of Sunanda Deshapriya of Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo which went on a fact finding mission to Sri Lanka last year had every opportunity to speak with the EPDP leader Minister Douglas Devananda to seek an explanation into the dubious allegations made against the EPDP and they did not undertake these measures. David Dudge, Deputy Director, International Press Institute, Vienna is on the payroll of the LTTE which clearly explains why this entire meeting was focused against the Government of Sri Lanka and not the LTTE.

<http://lankaguardian.blogspot.com/2007/10/exiled-journalists-network-meeting-held.html>

The following is a complaint sent to the Editor by EJN Co-ordinator Forward Maisokwadzo.

I'm writing from the Exiled Journalists' Network (EJN) to complain about this story. In addition, we urge you to correct your story as responsible journalists. However, let me start by thanking you for covering our event at the House of Commons.

The article uses highly inaccurate and misleading information. We are not sure where Mr Kausalya Rajanaiyagam the author of the article got his information. The writer made very serious assumptions without bothering to check with the EJN, the organisers of the conference, whose contact details were at the author's disposal on the programme.

The article claims, "Speakers had received payments from the LTTE to come over to London and speak about the plight of journalists in Sri Lanka."

The two speakers referred in the article Mr Sunanda Deshapriya, Convener, Free Media Movement on Sri Lanka & Head of Media Unit, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo and Nadaraja Kuruparan, News Manage (Tamil) ABC Radio Network, Sri Lanka are not members of EJN. Although they are journalists, they do not qualify to be full members of EJN. They are not exiled journalists. EJN invited them through a small financial support EJN received from the Open Society Institute to cover their flights and accommodation as part of Press Freedom Forum Series Project.

The article in question went on to make rather mischievous suggestions "...that this meeting was orchestrated with assistance of the LTTE for their own agenda and propaganda."

And also unashamedly makes claims that "The Exiled Journalists Network (EJN) were not critical of the LTTE and hardly spoke of the LTTE's had (sic) in the killings, disappearances and abductions of journalists in Sri Lanka including their hands in the killing of Sivram Taraki and Balanadaraja of (EROS) who worked as a journalist..." is totally misleading and dishonest.

Continued.....

EJN's role was just to organise and facilitate the discussion. This is why EJN tried to invite speakers from all sides including Seyed Bazeer whom the article praises but wrongly quoted, as he did not attack EJN at all. EJN gave all the speakers the platform to speak and the network is very grateful to all the speakers including Mr Bazeer for agreeing to speak at our event. Mr Bazeer spoke on the specific areas that we have asked him to (as shown earlier in this report) and he did perfectly well although time was rather short.

We re-iterate that EJN is not a Sri Lankan organisation and has no agenda at all concerning the Sri Lankan politics. EJN interests are about the safety of journalists world over and Sri Lanka included hence the reason why held the event.

When you say "Towards the end of the discussion Pearl Thevanayagam, EJN Secretary, invited representatives of the Sri Lankan High Commission to defend the dubious allegations that were made by members of the EJN..." Please Mr Rajanaiyagam try to check facts before you run your confusing and distorted stories. The only EJN members who spoke at the event was our chair Mohammed Elsharif and Pearl Thevanayagam who as you wrote in your article gave the floor to the embassy officials whom EJN officially invited in writing and we are grateful to them they did attend both events i.e. at House of Commons and Frontline Club.

Again it's not correct to say Michelle Stanistreet, President of the National Union of Journalists, UK and Ireland who chaired the meeting at House of Commons led any mission to Sri Lanka. Michelle and her union was not part of that mission. Where you are getting your information, we don't know. EJN was distributing a pack at the meeting (which all delegates received) with copies of reports of the mission including the organisations that were part of the mission.

Mr Editor, as a responsible journalist we urge you to publish our corrections. It is indeed a shame that a story full of falsehoods and inaccuracies was published without daring to check with the organisers of the event. To conclusively say the speakers are on LTTE payroll without having hard evidence is a testament of poor journalism and very unprofessional.

We welcome your speedy action on this regard.

No response was forthcoming from either the Editor or the writer.

At the time of publication the EJN is happy to report that no harm had come to participants in the Forum on press freedom in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka fact file

- Full name: Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka
- Population: 19.4 million (UN, 2005)
- Capital: Colombo (commercial), Sri Jayawardenepura (administrative)
- Largest city: Colombo
- Area: 65,610 sq km (25,332 sq miles)
- Major languages: Sinhala, Tamil, English
- Major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity
- Life expectancy: 71 years (men), 77 years (women) (UN)
- Monetary unit: Sri Lankan rupee
- Main exports: Clothing and textiles, tea, gems, rubber, coconuts
- GNI per capita: US \$1,160 (World Bank, 2006)
- Internet domain: .lk
- International dialling code: +94

Media

Media outlets are divided along linguistic and ethnic lines, with state-run and private operators offering services in the main languages. Many of the main broadcasters and publications are state-owned, including two major TV stations, radio networks operated by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), and newspapers in Sinhala, Tamil and English.

There are more than a dozen private radio stations, and eight privately-run TV stations. Sri Lanka's privately-owned press and broadcasters often engage in political debate, and criticise government policies.

In 2002, against the background of the peace process, the government allowed Tamil Tiger rebels to begin FM broadcasts of their Voice of Tigers radio station in the north. The station had previously operated on a clandestine basis.

As violence escalated in 2006, Reporters Without Borders said "murders, arrests, threats and bombings" had become "the daily lot" for many reporters. It added that Tamil factional violence had had "bloody" consequences for some journalists.

The internet is a growing medium for news; many papers have online editions.

Press

- *Daily News* - state-owned, English-language daily
- *The Island* - private, English-language daily
- *Daily Mirror* - private, English-language daily
- *Dinamina* - state-owned, Sinhala daily
- *Lankadeepa* - private, Sinhala daily
- *Lakbima* - private, Sinhala daily
- *Uthayan* - private, Tamil daily
- *Virakesari* - private, Tamil daily

Television

- Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) - state-owned, operates two channels: Rupavahini and Channel Eye
- Independent Television Network (ITN) - state-run, Sri Lanka's first TV station
- Sirasa TV - private, Sinhala
- MTV - private, English-language
- TNL - private, English-language

- ART TV - private
- ETV - private
- Swarnavahini - private, Sinhala
- Shakthi TV - private, Tamil

Radio

- Sri Lanka broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) - state-owned, operates domestic services in Sinhala, Tamil and English, including widely-listened-to Commercial Service
- TNL Rocks - private, English-language
- Sun FM - private, English-language
- Yes FM - private, English-language
- Sirasa FM - private, Sinhala
- Shree FM - private, Sinhala
- Sooriyan FM - private, Tamil
- Shakthi FM - private, Tamil

News agencies

- Lankapuvath - state-owned
- TamilNet - Tamil news service

Sources

The World Factbook, CIA (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html)

The World Guide, New International (11th edition), 2006/7

UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office / Department for International Development

Contact details

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South Asian Free Media Association

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