

PUBLIC

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24 January 2008

UA 22/08 **Fear for safety**

SRI LANKA **Staff working for *Uthayan* newspaper in Jaffna**

Staff at the *Uthayan* newspaper based in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, have recently been threatened. Their lives are believed to be at risk.

At around 10.45am on 6 January, the *Uthayan* newspaper office received a threatening telephone call demanding that the newspaper stop its production immediately. The caller did not give his identity but stated that he was calling from the island of Kayts, off the coast of the Jaffna peninsula.

On 29 April 2007, a young journalist working for *Uthayan*, Selvaraja Rajivaram, was shot dead near the newspaper's office. Selvaraja Rajivaram had been investigating reports of enforced disappearances.

On 16 August 2006 Sathasivam Baskaran, a delivery man at *Uthayan* newspaper, was reportedly shot dead in Jaffna by unknown gunmen when he was in a clearly marked *Uthayan* delivery vehicle after taking advantage of the temporary lifting of a curfew to deliver copies of the newspaper in an area controlled by the Sri Lankan armed forces.

In 2006, the *Uthayan* office was attacked by a group of armed men who shot dead two support staff at the newspaper. According to *Uthayan*, nobody has yet been arrested for this attack. Staff also claim that since the 2006 murders, the authorities have provided police protection at the office, though in recent months the number of police posted there at any one time has been reduced from 10 to three. This has not been increased since the threat to the newspaper on 6 January, despite requests from the newspaper's staff. One journalist from *Uthayan* has reportedly not left the newspaper's office for over a year for fear he may be killed.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Attempts to censor the media have increased with the collapse of the ceasefire between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The 2002 truce formally ended on 16 January 2008, following an announcement by the government to withdraw from the ceasefire agreement. Since the resumption of armed conflict in 2006, threats to the media and to media freedom in Sri Lanka have increased dramatically. There have been reports that at least ten media workers have been the victims of unlawful killings since the beginning of 2006; two have allegedly disappeared in the custody of the security forces; while others have been tortured and arbitrarily detained under emergency regulations (ERs) granting the government sweeping powers. The right to life of media workers particularly Tamil journalists is under severe threat from the security forces and others. Members of the security forces have attempted to intimidate media workers covering the conflict. On 2 January 2008 Army Commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka reportedly accused sections of the media and journalists of 'treachery' and being 'unpatriotic'.

Media workers in Jaffna are particularly vulnerable to intimidation because they are required to obtain a military permit to leave the peninsula. Seven media workers have been killed in Jaffna since the beginning of May 2006, four of these working with *Uthayan*.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern that staff at the *Uthayan* newspaper have recently been threatened and previously staff working for the newspaper have been killed;
- calling on the authorities to immediately provide adequate levels of police protection for the staff of *Uthayan* newspaper;
- calling on the authorities to order prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into all criminal acts including murder and incidents of intimidation, and to bring those responsible to justice;
- urging the authorities to respect and ensure respect for the right to freedom of opinion and expression, in compliance with Sri Lanka's obligations under the ICCPR and other treaties and standards.

APPEALS TO:

Hon. Mahinda Samarasinghe
Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights
2, Wijerama Mawatha
Colombo 7,
Sri Lanka
Fax: + 94 11 268 1980

Salutation: Dear Minister

Hon. Anura Priyadarshana Yapa, MP
Ministry of Mass Media and Information
163, Kirulapone Mawatha,
Polhengoda,
Colombo 05,
Sri Lanka.

Fax: 94 11 2513462/ 2513500/ 2513440

Salutation: Dear Minister

Mr. Victor Perera
Inspector General of Police
Sri Lanka Police
Headquarters
101/1 Kew Road
Colombo 2
SRI LANKA

Fax: + 94 11 2390433

Salutation: Dear Inspector General

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Sri Lanka accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 6 March 2008.