

# **Lasantha Wickrematunge and his contribution to Journalism in Sri Lanka**

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I consider it a privilege to speak a few words on the theme, "Lasantha Wikrematunga and contributions he made to journalism in Sri Lanka" at the announcement of UNESCO press freedom award with which the slain editor was honoured just yesterday.

It is exactly 125 days today since his assassination on. 8<sup>th</sup> January 2009. Lasantha Wickrematunge was on his way to the Sunday Leader office, the newspaper he gave birth to and the newspaper he cherished and considered to be his life. The time was around 10.30 in the morning and he had noticed that he was being followed. In a few minutes it was all over.

Two motor cyclists followed him while two motor cyclists were waiting at the place he was killed to block his path. All were wearing black. We still do not know how he was killed. The post- mortem report states he died of gun shot injuries. Doctors who examined him as he breathed his last couldn't find any evidence of external bullet wounds. Nor did the police find any empty cartridges. It was by all means a very very professional job. They came to kill him at any cost.

Why did they kill him? What was the contribution he made to Sri Lankan media that his killers wanted stopped? Yesterday and today, we are gathered here to celebrate journalism. It is a profession which we all know should be about accuracy, balanced and fair story telling.

Lasantha Wickrematunge, Editor of The Sunday Leader is remembered today for his professional courage - that is journalism. The killers are in hiding. Not only from society but also from themselves. They will never ever admit that they killed him. Most probably his real killers too may have publicly condemned the killing.

Lasantha is not the first journalist to get assassinated in Sri Lanka in recent times. And I am afraid that he may not be the last. But his killing sparked off a fear that no other journalist's death generated. It was like a final warning. Death was the penalty for airing dissenting opinion.

Just two days before he was killed, a popular TV and radio station, the MTV/MBC net work was set on fire. Two weeks after the killing of Lasantha, on 22<sup>nd</sup> January an attempt was made on the editor of the Rivira newspaper, Upali Tennakoon. A month later on 24<sup>th</sup> February, the editor of the SuderOli newspaper, N. Vithiyatharan was abducted and assaulted. The government later announced that he was in their custody. Five weeks later, on 1<sup>st</sup> of April, the Editor of the Vaara Ureikal M.I. Rahmahetulla was attacked with long knives and his office was destroyed. During the same period a number of editors were summoned to police intelligence units and questioned on war related issues and demanded to reveal their sources.

Suppression of media freedom and threats to journalists increased in Sri Lanka during the first three months of 2009. Over the last three and half years 20 journalists and media workers have been killed in Sri Lanka. Other news and alternate points of view became rare. The official government line was repeated again, this time sternly "Criticism and dissent in times of war is treason."

It is in this context that we must place Lasantha's contribution to media in Sri Lanka - that is media behavior in times of war. Of course there are many other contributions he made, such as his pioneering efforts in investigative and campaign journalism. His courageous advocacy of a negotiated political settlement to the conflict as opposed to a military option. To understand his contribution better, what we need to do is to look at media in Sri Lanka today, post Lasantha.

We all know that Sri Lanka is going through a humanitarian tragedy of untold proportions. The international media covering the Sri Lankan conflict does attempt to have a diverse and inclusive coverage. It is due to their efforts that the world came to know of the suffering of our people in the Vanni in recent weeks.

We journalists in Sri Lanka failed in the basics of journalism, we failed to do our duty by the suffering people in Vanni. Most of us who watch BBC, Al Jazeera, CNN have seen the footage of mothers soaked with the blood of their infants, fathers who carry their dead children, and hundreds of Tamil civilians killed in the battle field. Those are powerful images which show the horror of war that could have evoked a public response and even an outcry against the execution of a bloody war that victimizes mostly the non combatant civilians. Tamil civilians were being killed and injured in the hundreds everyday. This is a fact of life that no one can deny.

The Sri Lankan media has hit an all time low at present. This is true of the printed word as well as the audio visual media in covering the conflict and offering diverse opinion. Not a single Sri Lankan newspaper or a TV station prints or telecasts the horrifying images of the war zone today, the same we get to watch on international television coverage and in foreign newspapers.

A vast majority of Sri Lankans only hear and see war propaganda. For example, on a day that more than a hundred civilians had died in the war zone, one newspaper carried only one news item on civilian deaths: "three children killed by Tiger fire". Of course, the LTTE indiscriminately uses civilians as a human shield and there are credible reports to prove that they are shooting at people who are trying to escape. But those of us journalists who have witnessed this war for decades, know the other side does it too. Government fire also kills. Bullets do not discriminate. And whoever uses more firepower kills more.

Do we have a right to report when government fire kills? Do we have a right to investigate and report when charges are leveled against the government on the use of cluster bombs? Do we have the right to report on casualties of both sides? Do we have a right to investigate and report when hundreds of thousands of people are trapped in a war zone without basic human needs? Finally, when we report, as journalists do we have the right not to take a side in this war? If you look at Sri Lanka today the answer is a big NO!

Today, Sri Lankan media is practicing an unprecedented level of self-censorship. This war is a war without witness. War propaganda is what is dished as news. This is true for both sides. In suppressing media both sides have become mirror images, complementing each other.

A culture of silence prevails when it comes to reporting the horror of war and the humanitarian tragedy. A culture of impunity prevails when it comes to crimes against media and journalists.

As journalists we are aware that we are exercising self-censorship. Those of us who believe in publishing the truth, talk about that need amongst ourselves. But who amongst us is prepared to take that risk, after Lasantha's killing. His death had silenced many. Post Lasantha, the space for alternate news and another point of view is scarce. When people do not have fair access to information that is relevant to their lives, such a society becomes one of blind followers airing and printing the voices of the political masters.

This is where Lasantha made his mark. He pushed the limits set by the authorities. He dared to go beyond. He dared to challenge. He was fearless in performing his duty as a journalist. He never gave in to the pressure of self-censorship. He dared to dream. Given the current military/ political context of the country, I think Lasantha's central contribution to media in Sri Lanka was his courage and capacity to challenge the censorship within and outside. Official and unofficial.

Under Lasantha Wickrametunge, The Sunday Leader imbibed the true spirit of journalism, covering all sides of the war and often giving expression to the civilians' point of view. Lasantha reported on war casualties of both sides. He covered the unfolding humanitarian tragedy. He investigated and reported on military procurements. He challenged those in authority continuously and unrelentingly. He lived by the codes of the fourth estate and played the role of watch dog through public spirited journalism.

No doubt this is why he was killed.

Journalism is not a mere vocation but a service. Journalism driven by public service values encourages democracy, pluralism and respect for diversity. In the name of Lasantha Wickrematunge we all need to strive for qualitative journalism, which is- accurate, balanced and fair journalism. Hopefully, this period of darkness over the media in Sri Lanka will end sooner than later allowing journalists to practice their vocation without the shackles of today. I live in hope and I live for that day.

Thank you.