

Announcement of World Press Freedom Prize 2009 to the late Sri Lankan journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge

Remarks by I. Panevska, UNESCO Advisor in Communication and Information for South Asia

"And they came for me" – Lasantha's last Editorial

...When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me.

...

As for me, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I walked tall and bowed to no man. And I have not travelled this journey alone. Fellow journalists in other branches of the media walked with me: most of them are now dead, imprisoned without trial or exiled in far-off lands. Others walk in the shadow of death that your Presidency has cast on the freedoms for which you once fought so hard. You will never be allowed to forget that my death took place under your watch. As anguished as I know you will be, I also know that you will have no choice but to protect my killers: you will see to it that the guilty one is never convicted. You have no choice.

Sri Lankan journalist and editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, who was assassinated on 8 January this year, has been named as the laureate of the 2009 World Press Freedom Prize by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Born in 1958, Lasantha Wickrematunge was trained as a lawyer and was a member of the Sri Lankan Bar Association. While working as an attorney-at-law, he began working as an investigative reporter for the *Sun/Davasa* newspaper.

In 1994, he started the *Sunday Leader* with his brother and used the publication to campaign vigorously against the war between the Sri Lankan army and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In 2000, Mr. Wickrematunge secured a court victory which led to the abolition of the law that allowed the Government to curb the media. In November 2007, the *Sunday Leader* was damaged in an arson attack that Mr. Wickrematunge said resembled a "commando action."

He expected to be assassinated and went so far as to write an editorial for publication after his death. In the editorial, which appeared in the *Sunday Leader* three days after he had been murdered, Mr Wickrematunge voiced his commitment and readiness to die for press freedom: "[...] there is a

calling that is yet above high office, fame, lucre and security. It is the call of conscience."

Mr. Wickrematunge was chosen by a jury of 14 professional journalists from around the world, and is the second reporter in the award's 12-year history to be honoured posthumously. Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian journalist and outspoken human rights campaigner who was killed in 2006, was awarded the prize in 2007.

Jury members were moved to an almost unanimous choice by a man who was clearly conscious of the dangers he faced but nevertheless chose to speak out, even beyond his grave, pointed out Joe Thloloe, President of the jury and Press Ombudsman of the Press Council of South Africa, referring to the laureate's posthumous editorial.

"Lasantha Wickrematunge continues to inspire journalists around the world," he added.

UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura presented the award in a ceremony on 3 May, World Press Freedom Day, which the Organization celebrates this year in the Qatari capital, Doha.

"In awarding the 2009 World Press Freedom Prize to a committed journalist who opposed war, UNESCO, along with media professionals from all over the world, recognizes the important role that freedom of expression can play in fostering mutual understanding and reconciliation, the theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day celebration," said Mr. Matsuura.

Created in 1997, the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize is awarded annually to honour the work of an individual or an organization defending or promoting freedom of expression anywhere in the world, especially if this action puts the individual's life at risk. Candidates are proposed by UNESCO Member States, and regional or international organizations that defend and promote freedom of expression.

The prize, financed by the Cano and Ottaway family foundations, is named after Guillermo Cano, the Colombian newspaper publisher assassinated in 1987 for denouncing the activities of powerful drug barons in his country.

Lasantha's death has galvanized the growing anger among the press and other civil-society groups in Sri Lanka about restrictions on free expression in the country and intimidation of the media. Just two days before he was murdered, the offices of Sri Lanka's largest private broadcasting company were attacked in the middle of the night. Wickrematunge, who was trained as a lawyer, started the *Sunday Leader* with his brother almost on a whim. His intension was at first to get the newspaper off the ground and then to return to law, but he couldn't get

enough of the thrill of journalism. So it was especially frustrating for him to be prevented from running pictures or first-hand reporting from the war zones in northern Sri Lanka. The government refused to allow reporters or photographers regular access to the war zones or to those areas where an estimated 230,000 people have been stranded amid the shelling.

Even more than the war, Wickrematunge's specialty at the *Sunday Leader* was no-holds-barred, occasionally salacious stories alleging corruption and self-dealing among the powerful. No matter who the ruling party was, all officials were his potential targets. His paper's stories and editorials about the administration of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa have been particularly controversial. The newspaper is fighting a defamation lawsuit by Defense Secretary, the President's brother, over a series of *Leader* articles alleging corruption. The Sri Lankan government has denied responsibility for the attack on Wickrematunge and has called for an investigation.

The *Sunday Leader's* motto is "Unbowed and unafraid," and it's a good reflection of its editor's philosophy. Wickrematunge had worried over the past few days that he was being followed, but that had not diminished his enthusiasm for the next big story. Those who spoke to him an hour before the gunmen appeared, say that he was full of ideas. It will be up to the staff at the *Sunday Leader* — including his wife, also a journalist with the paper — to continue that work. His colleagues while waiting at the hospital during his surgery, decided to go back to the office before they knew whether their mentor and friend would survive. They couldn't think of a more fitting tribute to Lasantha than getting the newspaper out.

Wickrematunge was shot dead in broad daylight by a group of black-clad men on motorcycles as he was driving along a motorway. No arrests have been made in his killing. He used the *Sunday Leader* as a platform for his campaign against the war between Sri Lanka's army and the Tamil rebels.