

# **Statement of the International Press Freedom Mission to Sri Lanka**

**25 to 29 October 2008**

**International Federation of Journalists  
International Media Support  
International News Safety Institute  
International Press Institute  
Reporters Without Borders**

The International Press Freedom Mission to Sri Lanka, on its visit between October 25 and 29, found a deterioration in the press freedom situation since its last visit in June 2007, marked by a continuation in murders, attacks, abductions, intimidation and harassment of the media. In the recent World Press Freedom Index published by RSF, Sri Lanka has fallen to the lowest press freedom rating of any democratic country worldwide.

The International Mission is alarmed at the use of an anti-terrorism law for the first time in the democratic world, to punish journalists purely for what they have written. J.S. Tissainayagam, B. Jasiharan and V. Vallarmathy have been detained since March 2008 and later charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The Mission is worried about the dangerous precedent this sets for all media nationally and internationally.

In recent months journalists and media institutions seeking to report independently on the ongoing conflict have been attacked and intimidated in a seeming effort to limit public knowledge about the conduct of the war and to reveal their sources. This is a violation of the public right to know and the accepted norm that media sources should be protected.

Media in the North and East of the country have continued to bear the brunt of the worst forms of insecurity. Media access to war-affected areas is heavily restricted with journalists forced to reproduce information disseminated by the conflicting parties. Media are constantly threatened by all parties to the conflict in an effort to curtail independent and critical reporting. The International Mission condemns the murder of P. Devakumar in Jaffna in May 2008, as well as over a dozen other murders documented since 2005.

In the LTTE-controlled areas freedom of expression and freedom of movement continue to be heavily restricted preventing diverse opinions and access to plural sources of information.

Media rules gazetted on October 10th by the Sri Lankan Government provide for a number of contingencies under which broadcasting licences can be cancelled, including seven different grounds related to broadcast content. Moreover, a popular broadcast channel has been put on notice that it is to submit transcripts of news broadcasts "to be carried" every week as of October 28th. The International Mission deplores any effort to impose prior restraint or direct censorship on the media.

The International Mission is shocked at repeated instances of elected representatives and Government Ministers using violence and inflammatory language against media workers and institutions. The Mission is also concerned that state-owned media and the website of the Ministry of Defence have contributed to the vilification of independent media and journalists. Such actions can only be construed as efforts to discredit media through false accusations and clearly places them in danger.

The International Mission applauds the solidarity and resolve shown by the five organisations of journalists in Sri Lanka – the Free Media Movement, Sri Lankan Working Journalists' Association, Federation of Media Employees' Trade Unions, Sri Lankan Tamil Media Alliance and Sri Lankan Muslim Media Forum – in a tough and challenging situation.

Moreover, the International Mission supports the solidarity displayed by media owners and editors in seeking to bring the perpetrators of recent attacks on journalists to justice.

The International Mission would welcome the imminent invitation of the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression by the Sri Lankan government in line with its commitments to the Human Rights Council in 2006.

## **Background**

In October 2006 and June 2007 delegations from the International Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression Mission to Sri Lanka, which is comprised of twelve international press freedom and media development organisations, undertook fact-finding and advocacy missions to Sri Lanka.

In order to follow-up on these missions, the International Mission returned to Sri Lanka in October 2008. The delegation for this visit is comprised of the International Federation of Journalists ([www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org)), International Media Support ([www.i-m-s.dk](http://www.i-m-s.dk)), International News Safety Institute ([www.newssafety.org](http://www.newssafety.org)), International Press Institute ([www.freemedia.at](http://www.freemedia.at)), and Reporters Without Borders ([www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)).

Members of the International Mission met with the President of Sri Lanka, Ministerial Committee on Journalists Grievances, political parties, media owners and editors, journalists and media workers, human rights and legal experts, and the international community.