

Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka

In the first 100 days of new Presidency
9th January – 19th April 2015



The Government has not given green light to the production of a film on well-known journalist Richard de Zoysa who was abducted by the police and killed on 18 February 1990 (photo:Internet)

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INFORM was established in 1990 to monitor and document human rights situation in Sri Lanka, especially in the context of the ethnic conflict and war, and to report on the situation through written and oral interventions at the local, national and international level. INFORM also focused on working with other communities whose rights were frequently and systematically violated. Presently, INFORM is focusing on election monitoring, freedom expression and human rights defenders. INFORM is based in Colombo Sri Lanka, and works closely with local activists, groups and networks as well as regional (Asian) and international human rights networks

Summary:

Compared to 2014 and the Rajapakse rule, the intensity and number of attacks, threats and intimidations against dissent has decreased during the first 100 days of Sirisena's Presidency. However, very little action appears to have been taken to deal with the impunity of past incidents, and alarmingly, there were several incidents of suppression of dissent.

In the hill country, Police were accused of violently dispersing a protest with tear gas, when they had gathered at the Talawakelle Police Custody to condemn the death of a man in the custody of the Talawakelle Police.

In Colombo, civil and political activists distributing leaflets on 19th February were attacked by members of the pro-Rajapaksa National Freedom Front (NFF) at Nugegoda. The leaflets contained the text, "Ten Questions for Wimal Weerawansa and Vasudeva prior to the Yakshagamanaya" and were distributed by members of the Democratic People's Forum. The Inter-University Students' Federation (IUSF)'s protest march was attacked on 31st March by the Police and the Special Task Force, with some students injured and hospitalized. The Defense Ministry informed the director of a film about the slain journalist Richard de Zoysa that the subject matter would be inappropriate, as it recalls an unpleasant past, and informed the director that he will not be given permission to shoot the film.

In the North, Sri Lankan military dressed in civilian warned the displaced people in a military run high security zone against discussing their living conditions with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, Hugo Swire. A distributor of the Tamil weekly, Ithu Nam Theasam, a pro Tamil National People's Front (TNPf) paper, was threatened by military intelligence. In another incident in the North, drunk police officers in jerseys stopped three journalists, threatened them with knives and chased after them. Perhaps for the first time in history, a journalist (specifically, a Tamil journalist from North) was arrested and detained by Police for "providing false information for the publication of a news item." The Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) also summoned the Chairman of the Vavuniya Citizens Committee, while the activist Buddhist monk Ven. Wataruka Vijitha Thero was harassed by police officers.

Journalists of two private TV stations accused each other of illegal entry and assault respectively. Several persons were arrested and equipment was confiscated in Colombo, based on the accusation that they were cooperating with UK-based Channel 4 TV station, which has earlier produced documentaries accusing the Sri Lankan military of war crimes. One of the accused had an overseas travel restriction placed upon them.

It was reported that a journalist was assaulted in Puttlam, in relation to reports of individuals attempting to sell government lands.

While the detention without charge of the Woman human rights defender Balendran Jeyakumari ended on the 10th March, an overseas travel restriction was imposed on her and she was required to report monthly to a police station. Investigations in her case continue. Restrictions on freedom of expression and movement of INFORM's human rights adviser Ruki Fernando continue, and the investigation against him is also still ongoing.

1. Military threatens displaced persons not to talk to British Minister

The Sri Lankan military personnel dressed in civilian clothing, had gone to the Sabapathipillai Welfare Centre on 28th January and warned displaced Tamil residents from Valikamam North in the Jaffna district, not to speak about their plight with visiting British Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, Hugo Swire. "You will tell the visiting official that you want the lands that you are currently in. Do not instead request that you want the lands that are within the High Security Zone," a resident at the camp had quoted the military officer as saying.

<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=13596>

2. Death threats from SL military operatives to distributor of Tamil weekly

"You will be burnt to ashes together with these papers if you continued to distribute this paper," was the message of a squad Sri Lankan military intelligence to a distributor of the Tamil weekly, Ithu Nam Theasam, a pro Tamil National People's Front (TNPf) paper. Three operatives, who came in two motorbikes were following the distributor of Ithu Nam Theasam at Sivanakar in Kilinochchi on 10th March. The squad had stopped the distributor at a place where there was no civilian witnesses and seized the papers from him and threatened him with death, the distributor who did not wish to be named due to security reasons, told media.

<https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=37687>

3. Three Tamil journalists Intimidated



Three Jaffna-based journalists were intimidated by two police officers on 7th April. T. Vinojith of Thinakural daily, T. Pirgatheepan a Colombo-based journalist and freelance-journalist Majorapiriyana were stopped by two drunken officers in Police jerseys and were asked to show their press cards. When the journalists questioned the officers, they produced knives and chased the journalists until they reached the Jaffna police station.

<http://www.ifj.org/nc/news-single-view/backpid/1/article/sri-lanka-police-in-jaffna-criticised-for-arrest-and-intimidation-of-journalists/>

4. Leaflet distribution disrupted and activists attacked by pro-Rajapaksa group



Kalyananda Perera was injured in the attack (Photo-LNW)

Members of the National Freedom Front (NFF) attacked a group from the Democratic People's Forum, which consists of civil and political activists engaged in distributing leaflets. This leaflet, which was titled 'Ten Questions for Wimal Weerawansa and Vasudeva prior to the Yakshagamanaya' was being distributed among the public at Nugegoda on 19th February in conjunction with the meeting held in support of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. One of member of the group Kalyananda Perera who was injured in the attack has lodged a complaint at Mirihana Police station. Although two of the attackers were arrested by the police no case was filed.

<http://ceylontoday.lk/51-85177-news-detail-civil-activists-accuse-nff-of-assault.html> &
<http://lankanewsweb.net/news/10068-kalyananda-perera-accuse-wimal-weerawansa-for-hindering-the-democratic-people-s-forum>

5. Tamil journalist remanded for allegedly false report

N. Logathayalan, a freelancer for the Tamil daily newspaper Uthayan, was detained on 8th April in connection with a story he wrote for the paper that alleged a girl had been assaulted by Police in the Nellyyadi police station in Jaffna city, in the north of the country. Logathayalan was charged in connection with "providing false information for the publication of a news item," without citing a source, and had been released on bail.

<https://cpj.org/2015/04/journalist-faces-charges-after-publishing-report-c.php>

6. TV station alleges crew detained and assaulted by another TV station

It was reported in the media that MTV/MBC network alleged that its journalists were detained, assaulted, threatened, their cameras taken away when they visited another TV station, “TV Derana” to obtain a response in relation to a news item published. TV Derana claimed that the journalists from MTV/MBC entered their premises illegally. Police spokesperson ASP Gunasekera told media that the three journalists according to the “Organization in Maradana” entered their premises without prior approval, which if correct was a wrong deed. "On the other hand some workers at the Media institution in Maradana had assaulted the three journalists, which too is wrong," he added. (The organization in Maradana is a referral to TV Derana)

<http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=local/sirasa-vs-derana>

7. Courts imposes restrictions on woman human rights defender released after 362 days in detention without charges



Jeyakumari after being released from detention (Photo: @RadeepG)

After 362 days in detention without charges, Ms. Balendran Jeyakumari was released from detention on 10th March 2015, but she was asked to report to a Police station every month and an overseas travel restriction was placed on her. The investigation against her still continues. She has been a prominent advocate seeking truth and justice for disappeared persons, including her own son, who disappeared after being handed over to the Army in 2009.

<https://freejeyakumary.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/jeyakumary-and-9-other-political-prisoners-released-today/>

8. Passport impounded over supporting Channel 4

The Colombo Magistrate banned Ramanathna Aginam from travelling overseas over allegation that he has helped Channel 4 TV station in UK to prod use a film defamatory to the Government of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan military. The magistrate ordered to send his computer and other technical equipment to the University of Moratuwa for inspection, Boralla police told the court that several other suspects have been identified who helped Ramanathan to provide information to the Channel 4. Police had wanted to stop him leaving the country as the investigations are not yet over. http://www.dinamina.lk/2015/03/31/_art.asp?fn=n15033124

9. Journalist assaulted to cover-up a dubious deal



Journalist Hiran Priyankara Jayasinge of Puttlam was assaulted by some unknown person to prevent him reporting on a dubious land sale. The incident happened on 23rd March in Palaviya, Puttlam. Journalist Hiran Priyankara was admitted to Puttlam base hospital for treatment. He had told media that some persons who were attempting to sell a government land illegally assaulted him. A complaint has been lodged at the Puttlam police station.

Ada Derana / <http://goo.gl/qn5vqd>

Journalist Hiran Priyankara Jayasinge (Photo: Jude Samantha)

10. Vavuniya Citizen's Committee head summoned to TID



Krishnapillai Devarasa (Photo: Sri Lanka Mirror)

On 26th March, the head of the Vavuniya Citizen's committee Krishnapillai Devarasa was summoned to appear before the Terrorist Investigation Division of the Police. Devarasa has been a key organizer of the series of recent protests over the disappearance of people from the north and the east, including one demonstration in Vavuniya, and was hospitalized after being assaulted last year.

<http://www.srilankamirror.com/news/item/3105-vavuniya-citizen-s-committee-head-to-tid>

11.No clearance for the film on Murdered Journalist Richard de Zoysa

Citing a report by the Inspector General of Police (IGP) that it is inappropriate to recall an unpleasant past, the Defense Ministry has written to the director of the film to be made on the murder of journalist Richard de Zoysa, informing him that he cannot be given permission to shoot the film. Journalist De Zoysa was abducted by military personnel in civilian clothing from his Welikadawatte, Rajagiriya home on 18 February 1990. He had been tortured and killed, and the body found washed ashore at Korawalwella beach in Moratuwa on the following day. The film is to be based on the struggle launched by his mother, Dr. Manorani Saranavanamuttu, who founded Mothers' Front to bring mothers of missing persons together. Fifteen years after de Zoysa's killing, the accused were acquitted by the Colombo high court in 2005. Although some media reported that film has been given green light, reliable sources told INFORM no such permission has been given.

<http://english.srilankamirror.com/entertainment-mirror/item/2725-police-prohibits-film-on-richard-de-zoysa>

12.Authorities refuse to remove one year old gag order on human rights defender

21st March 2015 marked one year since restrictions were imposed on the freedom of expression and movement of human rights defender Mr Ruki Fernando, an adviser to INFORM, a human rights documentation centre in Colombo. These restrictions were issued by the Colombo Magistrate based on the request of the Terrorist Investigation Department (TID). Electronic equipment of Ruki was also confiscated through a similar court order. Ruki's lawyer made submissions to the Attorney General on 5 November 2014, requesting that the case against him be closed and that the restrictions be lifted. Though there have been indications that the travel restriction could be lifted, Ruki's lawyer was informed that the investigations were continuing and thus the case can't be closed, confiscated equipment cannot be returned and restriction on freedom of expression will not be lifted.



Ruki Fernando addressing a side event at UNHRC, March 2015

13. Police attacks University student protest

The Inter-University Students' Federation (IUSF) said that it will file a complaint at the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) alleging that the Police and the Special Task Force attacked a protest march they organized on 31st of March. The IUSF said that 24 undergrads were injured in the clash, and 10 who had received serious injuries due to baton blows to their heads and legs were hospitalized. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister's Office in a special statement released to the media said "Such incidents are unfortunate and sad to note. If the protesters had acted peacefully allowing their representatives to heed our invitation, none of this would have happened," the IUSF had not given any prior notification of their intention to hand over a letter to the Prime Minister's Office but had instead said they were going to hand it over to the University Grants Commission, the statement further said.

<http://www.ceylontoday.lk/51-89025-news-detail-iusf-to-go-to-hrcsl.html>

14. Teargas used against demonstrators against the Police

The police fired tear gas to disperse a group of protesters near the Talawakelle railway station, on 1st of February, Ada Derana reported. The protest was launched following the suspicious death of a man who died while in the custody of Talawakelle Police, on 31st January. However, the Police has denied that they used tear gas to disperse the crowd.

<http://www.adaderana.lk/news/29650/talawakelle-demonstrators-call-off-protest&>



Protesting people blocked the upcountry railway line for few hours (Photo: Ada Derana)

15. Activist Buddhist Monk harassed by Police

In a letter addressed the President Sirisena Ven. Wataruka Vijitha Thero had complained that police detained and harassed him when he tried to hand over a petition to the President about problems faced by people in his area. The Thero stated that 15 police officers stopped him at the Hebarawa junction of Mahiyanganaya, saying the three are 6 people waiting in next junction to kill him. After confiscating his mobile phone police has taken him to the Giradurukotte police station. The incident took place on 21st March according to the letter. Vijitha Thero has been a strong voice from within the Buddhist community supporting rights of non Buddhist religious communities and promoting inter-religious harmony, especially Muslims and Christians against whom violence has been directed in the past. He has been assaulted and threatened a number of times and since August 2013, a press conference he organized was disrupted in the presence of Police, but no prosecutions have been initiated against any of the perpetrators despite evidence being made available.

<http://goo.gl/eVzxG4>