

With media gagged or threatened, no progress for freedom of information

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Reporters Without Borders calls on all members of the Geneva-based United Nations Human Rights Council, which began its 19th session yesterday, to pass a resolution condemning the Sri Lankan government's violations of freedom of information and to demand an end to threats and violence against news media and human rights defenders in Sri Lanka.

“For more than a year we have been seeing new forms of censorship and a deterioration in journalists’ ability to work although the war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) officially ended in 2009,” Reporters Without Borders said. “Rather than wait until the Universal Periodic Review to make recommendations, the Human Rights Council’s members should adopt a resolution now urging the government to take measures to improve freedom of information.

“The number of cases of physical attacks, death threats and imprisonment may have fallen in 2010 and 2011, but the authorities continue to prevent the media from enjoying real editorial freedom and many journalists are still in exile. Sri Lankan and foreign media are still unable to cover the issue of war crimes, which will be at the centre of the Human Rights Council’s discussions during the 19th session.

“An immediate reaction is needed to the obstruction of journalists who want to cover the activities of the [Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission](#) (LLRC) and to self-censorship on this subject for fear of reprisals. The Human Rights Council must remind the Sri Lankan government of the importance of the media’s role as a critic and urge it to respect freedom of information. We call on the government to accept constructive questions from civil society and to stop branding its critics as ‘conspirators’ and ‘LTTE accomplices’.”

January - February 2012 timeline

Journalists and media defenders have been the constant targets of violence, threats and propaganda. The censorship of websites, especially those based abroad, has increased since the beginning of 2011. The events of the past two months amply illustrate the way the government is treating journalists.

Since 25 February: Distributed Denial-of-Service Attacks (DDoS) have been disrupting web traffic of [TamilNet.com](#). The service provider is struggling to keep the website online.

23 February: The supreme court held its third hearing on the blocking of news websites. Access to four leading independent news websites – [SriLankaMirror](#), [SriLankaGuardian](#), [Paparacigossip9](#) and [LankaWayNews](#) – has been blocked since 6 November on the orders of the

information ministry, which announced on 5 November that all news websites with “any content relating to Sri Lanka” needed to register with the ministry.

16 February: The defence ministry posted [an article](#) on its website accusing [Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka](#) (JDS), an exile organization, of “treachery and conspiracy” against the government and security forces on the eve of the Human Rights Council’s 19th session.

15 February: **Prasad Purnimal Jayamanne**, a freelance journalist working for the *BBC*’s Sinhalese service and a member of the [South Asian Free Media Association](#) (SAFMA), was attacked and badly beaten while filming a demonstration by fishermen in Chilaw, 100 km north of Colombo, in protest against the death of a fisherman at the hands of the police and the injuries sustained by others. Jayamanne had to be hospitalized.

8 February: The state-owned daily [Dinamina](#) accused the [Free Media Movement](#) of obstructing democracy and freedom in Sri Lanka, giving the country a bad image, and inciting separatism and terrorism.

26-27 January: Media minister Keheliya Rambukwella accused journalists of collaborating with the LTTE and with foreign media and NGOs in order to smear Sri Lanka’s image. He said he had a list of journalists working against the government, including the organisers of the “[Black January](#)” campaign, which was based on the fact that there were major press freedom violations every January during the past three years. They included Sunday Leader editor [Lasantha Wickrematunge](#)’s murder in January 2009 and political cartoonist [Prageeth Ekneligoda](#)’s disappearance in January 2010, which have become symbols of violence against the media and the impunity enjoyed by those responsible.

25 January (and following days): After the Alliance of Media Organizations in Sri Lanka held a “Black January” demonstration (which had to be moved to a different location because of a counter-demonstration by government supporters), some of the demonstration’s organizers were followed by unidentified individuals for several days.

10 January: The government accused the Free Media Movement of collaborating with the political opposition and organizing a campaign to get the European Union to suspend Sri Lanka’s preferential trade status under the GSP+ accord.

5 January: The start of the trial of a man accused of the April 2005 murder of journalist [Dharmeratnam Sivaram](#) was postponed by Colombo high court judge P. Surasena after the prosecutor said he was unable to proceed because six prosecution witnesses, including two policemen, had failed to show up. The judge also dissolved the jury. Sivaram was kidnapped in Colombo and his body was found near the parliament building the next day.

January (start of the month): When state-controlled *Independent Television Network (ITN)* broadcast footage of media freedom activists demonstrating during the September 2011 session of the UN Human Rights Council, it accused them of being LTTE members.

<http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-with-media-gagged-or-threatened-no-28-02-2012,41946.html>