

Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA)  
Federation of Media Employees Trade Union (FMETU)  
Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF)  
Sri Lanka Tamil Journalists Alliance (SLTJA)  
Free Media Movement (FMM)



SLWJA

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FMETU

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FMM

0777312457



SLTMA

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SLMMF

0777270032

Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapaksha  
Secretary of Defence,  
Ministry of Defence,  
Colombo, Sri Lanka.

28 May 2008

Dear Sir,

**Reprimand of senior journalists unacceptable**

We are extremely disappointed and very concerned to discover that you summoned and reprimanded Sanath Balasooriya and Poddala Jayantha, the President and General Secretary of Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) respectively over the protest campaign organized by our five media organizations against abduction and inhuman assault of *The Nation* journalist Keith Noyahr.

Your action has no historical precedent.

We held this protest campaign peacefully and under the freedom of expression enshrined in our Constitution. The aim of our protest was to demand that the government initiates an open and impartial investigation into the abduction and assault of Keith Noyahr and bring the culprits to the book. We openly stated that if the government does not apprehend the culprits and attempts to impair and impede the investigation, we hold it responsible for this heinous crime.

We understand that your position as articulated to the President and General Secretary of the SLWJA over two hours spent in your office was as follows:

- That it is unacceptable to criticise the armed forces whilst working in State newspapers.
- That anyone other than the leaders of the armed forces can be criticised.
- That the aim of our protest was to criticise the armed forces and that cannot be permitted.
- If both journalists continue criticising the military, neither the Secretary of Defence nor the regime are in a position to prevent actions taken against them by groups / persons who revere the Army Commander.

We wish to address these points.

The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL), commonly referred to as Lake House, is not State property or your own fiefdom. Successive governments since 1972 have used Lake House and other State media as instruments of propaganda. Sadly, instead of addressing this deplorable trend, the incumbent regime appears to be taking Lake House into new lows of servility.

Your assertion that journalists who work in State media cannot engage in the criticism of those in government and the armed forces is particularly revealing. It is regrettable that you consider the primary and overarching function of State media to be one that is unquestioningly supportive of the regime and whatever it does, says and thinks. We consider this position to be violently opposed to media freedom and the freedom of expression.

We believe it is the responsibility of the media to report in the public interest. We believe that Keith Noyahr exercised, both as a citizen and journalist, his fundamental rights to report critically on issues vital to war, peace and governance in Sri Lanka. That he was subject to grievous physical injury and trauma and that he is only the latest in a growing line of journalists subject to verbal and physical assaults is cause for deep concern.

We are outraged by your thinly veiled repeatedly expressed threat that the lives of Sanath Balasooriya and Poddala Jayantha would be in grave danger should they continue to defend the right to independent reportage critical of the military and the regime. Clearly, it is a problem that you see no problem in such odious expression. At a time when the President and his government seeks to assure us that all is well with the protection and fullest enjoyment of fundamental rights in Sri Lanka, your behaviour – and not for the first time – is a significant marker of the ground reality and the challenges facing free media and human rights.

As Sri Lanka's five major media collectives we hope that you will act within the democratic frame work of the country. Otherwise at the end it is the government that has to be accountable for your actions and statements. We earnestly hope that your office or the regime does not harm, in any way, courageous journalists who stand up for their rights and those of the larger public. We demand that you recognise the freedom of expression and support media freedom in Sri Lanka.

We assure you that we remain undeterred in our struggle for media freedom in Sri Lanka and in light of your comments are emboldened to continue independent and critical coverage of the regime's actions to undermine the rule of law, human rights, media freedom and democracy.

Finally, we note that Lakshman Hulugalla, the Director of the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS) has in a press conference today noted that Sanath Balasooriya and Poddala Jayantha have no right to criticise government policy and were summoned by the Secretary of Defence regarding to inform them of this.

We jointly and unequivocally condemn this statement. The actions and statements of these individuals strengthen the case that the regime shows scant regard for and little interest in protecting and strengthening media freedom in Sri Lanka.

cc: media, civil society organizations and political parties