

CPJ calls for diplomatic pressure on Sri Lanka after gunmen assassinate editor of The Sunday Leader newspaper

Editor shot repeatedly in the head and chest on his way to work in Sri Lankan capital Colombo

Diplomatic pressure needed to protect journalists

New York, January 8 (CPJ)—With today's murder of the editor-in-chief of the The Sunday Leader newspaper, the Committee to Protect Journalists called on concerned ambassadors in Colombo to weigh in forcefully and immediately with President Mahinda Rajapaksa to put an end to the attacks raining down on Sri Lanka's media.

Editor Lasantha Wickramatunga was a prominent senior Sri Lankan journalist known for his critical reporting on the government. A source in Sri Lanka who insisted on anonymity out of fear for his safety told CPJ that Wickramatunga was shot repeatedly with an automatic pistol equipped with a silencer while driving to work in the Colombo suburb of Attidiya. His assailants bashed in



the window of the car before shooting him in the chest and head, according to colleagues and local and international news reports. He was pronounced dead shortly after 2 p.m. in Colombo, after three hours of emergency surgery.



Medical staff try to resuscitate Lasantha Wickramatunga, chief editor of the Sunday Leader newspaper, at a hospital after he was shot by an unidentified gunman, in Colombo January 8, 2009. Wickramatunga, editor of a newspaper that has been highly critical of the Sri Lankan government, was in a car on his way to work when he was attacked, Wickramatunga's brother Lal said. REUTERS/Stringer (SRI LANKA)

This morning's killing follows the January 6 early morning assault by about 15 masked gunmen on Maharaja TV (MTV) studios outside Colombo. Earlier, some state media had called the station "unpatriotic" for its coverage of the war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). CPJ called for an impartial parliamentary inquiry into the attack, saying the government has been a prime suspect in

attacks on journalists in the past. Rajapaksa has condemned today's killing as well as the attack on MTV.

"The sheer brutality of the attacks in recent days is a clear indicator

of how the war on the Sri Lankan media has moved far beyond the use of threats, intimidation, legal harassment, and sporadic

violence to curb the media,” said Bob Dietz, CPJ’s Asia program coordinator. “The assassination of Lasantha Wickramatunga signals that the government is unable or unwilling to protect the country’s journalists who dare to report critically. The international community in Colombo must act quickly to bring pressure on President Rajapaksa to reverse this murderous trend.”

The Sunday Leader is well known for being critical of Rajapaksa’s government. In a recent editorial, the paper accused the president of stepping up the war with the secessionist LTTE in order to stay in power.

Sunday Leader Editor shot dead

By Sarath Malalasekera and Rafik Jalaldeen

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, Jan. 8 (Daily News)—Editor of the Sunday Leader Lasantha Wickramatunga was shot dead by unknown assailants travelling on a motorcycle at Attidiya near Mt. Lavinia yesterday morning.

Wickramatunga was driving to office when the gunmen targeted him near the Bakery junction in Attidiya. The incident occurred around 10.30 am.

He was rushed to the Colombo South Teaching Hospital with severe gun shot wounds and was immediately put under surgery.

According to Director Colombo South Teaching Hospital Dr. Anil Jasinghe, the victim was brought in a critical condition with brain injuries due to gun shot wounds. Two specialist teams of Neuro Surgeons were dispatched to the Hospital to assist but by then it was too late.

Police Spokesman Senior SP Ranjith Gunasekera said special police teams from the Mt. Lavinia Police were conducting investigations to trace the motorcycle and the gunmen.

Wickramatunga (50) who is also an attorney-at-law had earlier worked at the Island and Sun Newspapers before taking over his present assignment.

An old boy of St. Benedict’s College, Kotahena he was also a good sportsman while at school.

President condemns killing of Sunday Leader editor Lasantha Wickramatunga

President Mahinda Rajapaksa yesterday condemned the murder of Sunday Leader Editor Lasantha Wickramatunga.



The President in his statement said: “My Government and I most vehemently and unequivocally condemn the murder of Lasantha Wickramatunga, Editor of The Sunday Leader, which took place yesterday.”

“I am both grieved and shocked by his tragic death as Mr. Wickramatunga was a close friend of mine who I have known for many years as a courageous journalist.” “This heinous crime points to the grave dangers faced by the democratic social order of our country, and the existence of forces that will go to the furthest extremes in using terror and criminality to damage our social fabric and bring disrepute to the country.

It is significant that such an attack was carried out at a time when the country is gaining repeated victories over the forces of

terrorism, in our efforts to establish freedom and democracy throughout the country.”

“I have directed the Police to conduct the most thorough investigation to bring to book any and all persons responsible for this act of brutality, with maximum speed.”

“On this sad occasion I extend my deepest sympathies to the members of the family of the late Mr. Wickramatunga, to all his colleagues in The Sunday Leader and associated newspapers, and in the profession of journalism.”

Despite grave threats of this nature, my Government reiterates its commitment to upholding the principles of Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression, even under the most trying circumstances, as we have witnessed today.”

EU condemns assassination of Sri Lankan journalist in Colombo

BRUSSELS, Jan. 8 (Xinhua)—The European Commission condemned the assassination of the chief editor of the Sri Lankan Sunday Leader newspaper, Lasantha Wickrematunga, who was shot Thursday morning near Colombo and has subsequently passed away, and urged the Sri Lankan authorities to take measures to ensure safety of journalists in the country.

“I was deeply shocked to learn about today’s assassination of Lasantha Wickrematunga, the chief editor of Sri Lanka’s Sunday Leader newspaper. This attack comes just two days after a privately-owned television station was attacked and set on fire and follows several incidents of harassment and threats of journalists in Sri Lanka that have

occurred over recent months,” said European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner in a statement.

“Our concerns about the freedom of the media, already under severe pressure from assaults and intimidation, have been exacerbated by the killing of Lasantha Wickrematunga,” she said.

Meanwhile, she called on the Sri Lankan government to put in place protection mechanisms to ensure safety of journalists in Sri Lanka. “I urge the Sri Lankan authorities to take all necessary steps to bring the perpetrators to justice, as there can be no impunity for these terrible crimes,” she added.

Unidentified gunmen shot and injured Wickramatunga at about 10:30 a.m. (0500 GMT) in Attidiya, a suburb area south of Colombo, and died later in hospital due to injuries. The incident came only two days after MTV and Sirasa TV studio complex in the Colombo suburb of Pannipitiya was destroyed by an armed gang.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has ordered the police to carry out an investigation into the attack on the studio, but so far nobody has been arrested. Earlier, the Sirasa TV was criticized by some sections for not patriotic in covering the current military conflict between government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels.

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