

URGENT ACTION



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27 October 2009

UA 288/09 – Fear for safety

SRI LANKA Frederica Jansz (f), journalist
Munza Mushataq (f), journalist

Two female editors at a national newspaper in Sri Lanka, Frederica Jansz and Munza Mushataq, have received death threats. The founder and former Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper, Lasantha Wickrematunge, was killed in January after receiving a similar death threat.

On 22 October, Frederica Jansz, Editor-in-Chief of the *Sunday Leader*, and the newspaper's News Editor, Munza Mushataq, received identical death threats by post, hand-written in red ink. Lasantha Wickrematunge was murdered three weeks after he received a similar death threat, also written in red ink.

The threats relate to the coverage by the *Sunday Leader* of a video, broadcast on UK TV station Channel Four in August, which allegedly showed Sri Lankan soldiers executing Tamil prisoners. The Sri Lankan government has stated that the video had been faked, but on 18 October the *Sunday Leader* printed an article on its front page, highlighting a report that an analysis of the video had concluded that the footage had not been tampered with or edited.

The threatening letters were postmarked 21 October, just three days after the newspaper ran its controversial story. Both letters included text saying "if you write anymore, we will kill you, [and] slice you into pieces". The journalists reported the threat to Sri Lanka's Inspector General of Police, and also to local police in the capital, Colombo. However, no action has yet been taken by the authorities.

In September, Dileesha Abeysundera, who works for the Sinhala-language edition of the *Sunday Leader* and also campaigns for greater press freedom in Sri Lanka, was threatened (see UA 269/09). There have been numerous serious attacks on the staff of the *Sunday Leader* and its publishers. Its offices have been burnt down, bombed and sealed several times.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Physical attacks and the relentless intimidation of journalists, as well as government-imposed restrictions on reporting, are threatening freedom of expression in Sri Lanka. Unprecedented levels of violence against media workers reporting stories critical of the government have contributed to a climate of fear and self-censorship that denies Sri Lankans the right to information. Journalist J.S. Tissainayagam was sentenced to 20 years rigorous imprisonment on 31 August 2009, on charges that his reporting on human rights issues promoted terrorism.



Amnesty International's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights.

Numerous journalists have been detained while others have fled the country following death threats. At least 14 media workers have been killed since 2006. Investigations into the unlawful killings of journalists have failed to result in prosecutions.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible:

- to ensure the safety of Frederica Jansz and Munza Mushtaq, in accordance with the wishes of the journalists themselves;
- to immediately investigate the death threats received by the two journalists on 22 October, and the attacks on other Sri Lankan journalists and media workers, with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- to abolish or reform legislations that are being used to suppress the right to freedom of expression and put an end to the climate of impunity that has allowed a long campaign, by state agents and paramilitary groups, of intimidation and violence against independent journalists in Sri Lanka.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency the President

Mahinda Rajapaksa
Presidential Secretariat
Colombo 1
SRI LANKA

Fax: 011 94 11 2446657

Salutation: Your Excellency

Inspector General of Police

Jayantha Wickramaratne
Sri Lanka Police Headquarters
101/1 Kew Road, Colombo 2
SRI LANKA

Fax: 011 94 11 244 6174

Salutation: Dear Inspector General

COPIES TO:

Ambassador JALIYA WICKRAMASURIYA
Embassy of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri
Lanka

2148 Wyoming Ave. NW
Washington DC 20008

Fax: 1 202 232 7181

Email: slembassy@slembassyusa.org

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.

Check with the AIUSA Urgent Action office if sending appeals after 8 December 2009.