

# STUDY OF MEDIA IN THE NORTH-EAST OF SRI LANKA

CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES

&

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SUPPORT, DENMARK



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# SRI LANKA



Compounded by protracted ethno-political conflict and ineffective media reforms and coupled with the imperatives of market economics, the mainstream media in Sri Lanka continues to be burdened with a number of problems. Many newspapers, for instance, perceive ethnicity as immutable and innate, and, on account of a conscious decision or distinct lack of willingness, do not demystify stereotypes and buttress institutions and practices that can ameliorate ethno-political conflict. In short, a segment of the media in Sri Lanka often exacerbates existing communal and ethnic tensions by playing on the nationalist and religious emotions of the people.

Fourteen months into a ceasefire agreement, decades of ossified media culture show signs of a gradual change. Much attention has recently focused on the media and its part in the ethno-political conflict of Sri Lanka. However, articles in the press examining the complex interactions between the media and the conflict have been reactionary, cautioning the public against tenets of 'peace journalism', or have too easily come to the conclusion that media in Sri Lanka is unproblematic and objective in its reporting. On the other hand, debate on the underpinnings of media freedom in Sri Lanka, coupled with an examination of its biases, ethno-centricity and market driven agendas has been sparse. Ergo, the role of the media as an essential and pivotal institution of democratic governance, and an examination on how it can best aid conflict transformation and help support and critically analyse the emergence of a post-conflict situation is of pivotal importance to the evolving context in Sri Lanka.

An enabling context was lacking at the time of the study to include the full participation of all the stakeholders in the peace process and the media in the study. Events which seriously undermined the stability of the peace process overshadowed the problems faced by journalists in the North-East.

However, the authors did manage to meet with a wide spectrum of stakeholders and believe that the report effectively captures the general texture of a region in which the media has operated under the most difficult of conditions for over two decades.

While the report is by no means representative of all media in the North-East, it nevertheless presents a context in which there is much space for sustained interventions in conflict sensitive journalism, basic training, capacity and skills development and IT based training.

It is our hope that this report in some way will contribute to improve the working and living conditions of journalists in the North-East, and in the process, help engender a more socially responsible media in a war ravaged region.

Sunanda Deshapriya  
Sanjana Hattotuwa

June 2003

#### List of people interviewed

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1. Mr. Mohana Das – Vice Chancellor, University of Jaffna
2. Mr. Gopalakrishna Iyer – Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna
3. Prof. Rajaratnam Sivachandran – Dept. of Geography, University of Jaffna
4. Mr. Senathirajah Jeyananthamoorthy (leading Tamil journalist in Jaffna) and members of the Jaffna Tamil Journalists Union
5. Mr. S. Kathirgamathamby, President of the Northern Journalists Association
6. Mr. Oliver Weerasinghe – Chairperson of Committee to look into attacks on journalists in the North-East
7. Mr. M.S.M. Noordeen – President, Kattankudy Media forum
8. Mr. Malavi S.M.M. Mustapha - Secretary, Kattankudy Media forum
9. Mr. A.L. Fulululla - Vice President, Kattankudy Media forum
10. Mr. M.S.A. Majeed - Director Information, Kattankudy Media forum
11. Mr. R.T.M. Anas - Deputy Director of Information, Kattankudy Media forum
12. Mr. U.L.M.N Nubeen – Peace Coordinator, Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)
13. Mr. Moulavi M.M.S. Ahmed - prominent religious and civil leader in the city
14. N. David - Secretary, Eastern Journalist Association
15. R. Thurairathnam – President, Eastern Journalist Association
16. S. Sivaram - Editor, North Eastern Herald
17. S. Jeyamoorthy - Journalist
18. Mr. Ponniah Manikavasagam – President, Vanni Journalists Association

## Summary

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Where undemocratic politicians inspire, provoke and underwrite national fears and prejudices, and where journalists do not benefit from a tradition of independence, but satisfy demands of leaders for support for the 'national interest', media soon becomes a vehicle for propaganda. This is often the case in Sri Lanka, where the constant quest of media is an elusive search for 'objectivity'. In this quest, propaganda becomes truth, and the search itself becomes rooted in vested interests that often veil and distort reality.

Ideally, the news media should serve as a forum in which proponents and opponents are encouraged to express their views in an open and reasoned fashion. While such an ideal is rarely achieved, it is important nevertheless to identify those structures and processes that prevent constructive criticism and healthy debate on the peace process.

Nowhere is this more imperative than in the North-East of Sri Lanka. For over two decades, the capacity of the media in this region has been severely affected by the brunt of the armed conflict. Although there possibly never is a 'ripe moment' for sustained interventions with media in a time of uncertain conflict transformation, it is the hope of the authors and the organisations behind this report that genuine and persistent interventions with media in the North-East could buttress moves on the ground to develop greater inter-ethnic and communal understanding, thereby leading to a media culture in Sri Lanka which does not forget its social responsibility.

This is the first report in over two decades that examines the situation of the media in the North-East. In it, several key media personnel as well as several civil society activists in the region have been interviewed to ascertain an overview of the media situation in a war battered region. Several key recommendations follow, among them:

1. Improving relations between Tamil and Muslim media communities, and thereby the wider communities
2. Supporting the Muslim and Tamil Journalists Associations in defending the rights of journalists in the North-East.
3. Development of monitoring and advocacy activities
4. Safety training for journalists working in the North-East
5. Build professional standards capacity (to bring them on par with internationally accepted norms of professional reporting)
6. Provision of basic computers and telecommunications equipment for journalists in the North-East, along with IT skills training

It is imperative that these shared concerns are addressed in a holistic manner, since they are inextricably entwined and very hard to compartmentalise. The authors stress the need for all efforts at building the capacity of media in the North-East to be coordinated, sincere and sustained.

## Introduction

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In his annual Heroes Day message on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1999, the leader of the LTTE Vellupullai Prabhakaran pledged “we have not abandoned the path of peace. We want to resolve the conflict through peaceful means, through civilised methods, without recourse to a bloodbath and the destruction of life”. Furthermore, Prabhakaran added that “peace talks should be held in a cordial, peaceful atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill with...international third-party mediation”. As Prabhakaran was speaking from a position of relative strength, following a string of military successes, his remarks carried increased significance for close observers of the conflict.

The signing of an indefinite ceasefire between the Government of Sri Lanka and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in February 2002 ushered in the most secure and promising period in the island's troubled recent history. For the remainder of 2002, and until the time of writing, these two protagonists have been negotiating a permanent political settlement. Despite the progress to date, much remains to be done to transform this period of non-war into a sustainable peace – particularly as some of the most contested and potentially disruptive political and military issues (e.g. disarmament, minority rights and the design of appropriate political institutions) have yet to be addressed, let alone resolved.

In 2003, fifteen months after a ceasefire agreement between the Government and the LTTE, the essential fragility of the peace process is still very evident. The ceasefire per se has held, and several hundred lives have been saved. But the process itself remains volatile, an unwilling pawn in partisan politics. Furthermore the peculiar political configuration in Sri Lanka –for the first time since its independence, the President and the Parliament belong to rival political parties – has also undermined the stability of the peace process. This is a political dynamic with deep significance for the peace process - it will invariably, as it has on innumerable occasions in the history of post-independence politics in Sri Lanka, make for political uncertainty and cloud the peace process. It can be argued that the lack of any coherent co-habitation will not lead to a complete breakdown of peace talks, but instead result in a protracted process with no clear vision of a final settlement.

The suspension of peace talks by the LTTE in earlier this month, following its exclusion from the Washington donor conference, has once again shown the need for constant efforts to keep the peace process on track. This paper is a brief attempt to map the dynamics of the negotiations over one year, and examines the challenges to the process and how they will influence the future of what is still an embryonic peace process.

Sri Lanka has spent more than US\$850 million a year on the war effort and has deployed more than 100 thousand troops to combat the Tamil Tigers.<sup>1</sup> According to some figures, it was estimated that by 1998 approximately 650,000 people have been displaced, 250,000 have emigrated, 50,000 are housed in very basic welfare centres, and about 64,000 people have been killed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sri Lanka: an unwinnable war? [BBC](#), 27 April 2000

<sup>2</sup> Ross Howard. *Low Standards, Low Tolerance, and Levers for Change*. June 2002.

Public opinion research revealed very strong public support for the ceasefire agreement, and the support crosses both ethnic and regional boundaries. The government won substantial majority of votes in local elections in March 2002 campaigning the peace process.<sup>3</sup>

#### Media Overview<sup>4</sup>

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Despite more than 150 years of tradition, the Sri Lanka media faces increasing obstacles and difficulties in functioning as an independent neutral conveyor of news and fair-minded protector of democracy. The decline in standards accelerated in the last 15 years but the indigenous-language media have long histories of identifying with political agendas which promoted their ethnic and religious identities during the Colonial period. The media played major roles in the 1950s in installing governments which made Sinhala the only official language, for a period, and Buddhism the only religion protected in the constitution. In the post-Colonial era, English-language newspapers from the same indigenous publishing houses increasingly reflected the same exclusionary values.

The ethnic partisanship has become more intense in the context of the war with the LTTE, to the point that some Sinhala papers have been categorized as “pro-war” meaning anti-Tamil, anti-Muslim, anti-negotiations and anti the current government which favours negotiations. It remains common for Sinhala papers to establish the ethnicity of individuals when reporting mundane events and especially when it touches incidents related to crime. Similarly on the Tamil side the indigenous media has increasingly come to reflect the extremist LTTE nationalism.

Cross-cultural reporting by the indigenous papers is almost non-existent. There is some reprinting of translated articles from the other languages but often these articles are intended to demonstrate pejorative aspects of the other ethnicity. Reporting from the LTTE-controlled area was effectively banned by military censors, except to convey Government victories, so the ground reality of the war has never been evident to most Sri Lankans. Independent reporting in LTTE-controlled areas has been extremely difficult. However, there have been a few notably admirable exceptions of semi-independent Tamil publishing in Jaffna, notably Uthayan newspaper.

Lake House, which is in the main perceived to be the propaganda arm on the incumbent government, publishes influential newspapers in all three languages. In fact, a deeply entrenched partisan media culture envelopes almost all Sri Lanka mainstream media.

Since 1980, a significant number of additional mainstream media outlets have been established as commercial ventures, but none have survived as prototypically independent operations. Editors, publishers, and news directors, especially in the Government media institutions are often prey to partisan agendas. In both public and private operations, there is a pattern of appointing senior managers who are favourable to or related through family connections to dominant political players.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from “Media Environment” section on Ross Howard’s report *Low Standards, Low Tolerance, and Levers for Change*. This is a report on IMPACS’ mission to assess media competencies and opportunities in Sri Lanka in June 2002. Some editing has occurred.



Additionally, successive governments have used security and anti-terrorism legislation to suppress pursuit of information critical of the government or the military.

There is no Access to Information legislation yet (although the present Government has terated support of Freedom of Information legislation), and an independent press council and complaints process has only just been set up (but at the time of writing, has yet to be operationalised).

There are eight newspapers publishing houses that published 12 weekly papers in Colombo, but there are also Sunday editions. In terms of radio stations, there are about 13 private FM stations broadcasting in three languages, Sinhalese, Tamil, and English, in addition to the state-own system of a national service and four regional and four unique community outlets. There are currently three state television channels and six private ones, including one which broadcast in Tamil. Internet is available through at least eight service providers to serve mainly in Colombo. There is also access to BBC World newscast, satellite, and limited cable.

The LTTE has its own media structure including a major radio operation (Voice of the Tigers Radio), a small newspaper, an extensive video production unit, and an extensive Tamil Net website.

Sri Lanka enjoys exceptional literacy rates (90% plus), a historical legacy of professional journalism, and a diversity and financial capacity among much of the media industry. The Colombo-based media and especially the newspapers exercise considerable influence over popular and elite opinions in the country.

There are several journalists' organizations that work for the promotion of their profession: Working Journalists' Association, the Photo-Journalists Association, the Editor's Guild of Sri Lanka, Foreign Correspondents' Association, and the Free Media Movement. The latter groups interdependent journalists working in different media fields and it's the most active lobbying and advocacy organization in Sri Lanka that works on behalf of the freedom of expression and information.<sup>5</sup>

Other media organizations that provide journalism and communications training are the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI) and the Sri Lanka Newspaper Society. The Centre for Counter-Conflict Journalism (CCCJ) was created to address nationalistic and ethnic conflicts within the journalism community. At the beginning of 2003, the Sri Lanka Government announced the establishment of the Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI) to promote press freedom and enhance the professional standards of media personnel in the country. This is an effort undertaken by the Sri Lanka Newspaper Society, the Editors' Guild, and the Free Media Movement.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sunanda Deshapriya. Media Freedom in Sri Lanka, 2002: Some Critical Issues. International Federation of Journalists (IFJ Asia-Pacific). [www.ifj-asia.org/Sri\\_Lanka\\_Media\\_Freedom.html](http://www.ifj-asia.org/Sri_Lanka_Media_Freedom.html)

<sup>6</sup> "Government facilitates donor funding for press institution and media training centre". *Daily News*. Sri Lanka. 8 January 2002. [www.origin.dailynews.lk/2003/01/08/new21.html](http://www.origin.dailynews.lk/2003/01/08/new21.html)

## Current Journalism Situation<sup>7</sup>

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The most evident problem in Sri Lanka's media is the lack of adherence to the internationally recognized basic standards of accuracy, impartiality and responsibility. Glaring examples occur in almost all publications in all three languages, and are replicated in television newscasts. Major news stories often lack balance, and third-hand information is accepted unattributed. Most stories lack context. Attributed information often is inaccurate, suggesting no second-sourcing was employed. When applied to issues such as the peace negotiations and possible compromises and trade-offs, or when truce violations are alleged, the implications of the reporting can be highly damaging to public understanding and support for the peace process.

The majority of the estimated 2,500-3,000 journalists in Sri Lanka have had limited or no professional training in adhering to basic standards. Several universities – Kelaniya, Colombo, Aquinas and Open University- plus the semi-autonomous Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI) and several private institutions offer journalism courses or in two cases, specialist degrees, but they almost uniformly focus on the theory of mass communications and journalism, and offer very little practical teaching and experience. Almost no journalism is taught in Tamil anywhere.

The majority of those who have taken institutional journalism training, and especially those with English-language ability, seek and find employment in advertising, public relations or government communications, where the pay is markedly better. Journalism as a profession is currently poorly paid. Active journalism tends to attract the lesser-skilled graduates of journalism training. English-language editors consistently complain about their inability to find and attract enough reporters capable of writing in English.

Most current practicing journalists entered the profession with little training, and were given only rudimentary introductions to their role, on the job. Few organizations have any structured training programs in-house. A small number of working journalists have taken training abroad through international organizations' auspices. A number have attended brief seminars and workshops offered by international organizations. While basic training is acknowledged by most editors and managers as a major shortcoming, some of them also volunteer confirmation that middle-level managerial skills are equally in need to development. News judgment, copy-handling skills and reporter supervision is severely limited.

The intensification of ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka and the extensive media suppression justified by the war has produced a sharp decline in basic competency in the last decade, according to one Sri Lankan journalist who worked abroad in respected international publications for a decade and returned recently. As government and owner-managerial interference increased and experienced journalists of an earlier era increasingly left the business and were replaced by unskilled and untalented juniors, "standards have dropped incredibly." Standards include not only basic skills, but also enterprise, dedication and imagination, and a sense of public service.

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from "Current Journalism" section on Ross Howard's report *Low Standards, Low Tolerance, and Levers for Change*. This is a report on IMPACS' mission to assess media competencies and opportunities in Sri Lanka in June 2002. Some editing has occurred

## Open Question

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There is a very real sense of hopelessness amongst those who are engaged in media reform that the situation in Sri Lanka is too complex and convoluted for any real change to take place. Ideally, the news media should serve as a forum for constructive debate involving a wide spectrum of opinion.

Is this possible in Sri Lanka? Given the historical antecedents, the concretised mindsets of some editors who are often skeptical about change and reform, and the conservative nature of ethnic ownership, it is not impossible to think that media in Sri Lanka will continue to be tri-lateral, disturbingly ethno-centric and divisive.

The problem facing journalists in Sri Lanka is how to protect their 'independence' when the world around them asks them to follow strategies and ethics which bind them to a certain ideology and path. No path or method is value neutral. And yet, the imperatives of journalism – accuracy, fairness, impartiality and reliability<sup>8</sup> – bolstered by the freedom of expression, speech and information and open government provide the backbone of democratic pluralism.

## Scope & Nature of the Study

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With the above considerations in mind, the study looked specifically at the media in the North-East of the country. The North-East in particular has borne the brunt of the protracted ethno-political conflict that has devastated the country. There is little in the form of solid infrastructure, and some areas in the North in particular resemble something out of a set of a Hollywood war movie – shelled out carcasses that were once buildings, and overgrown shrub land in what were once habitable areas serve as stark reminders of a conflict that has not only destroyed property, but livelihoods as well.

It is still a remarkably volatile region. Repressed inter-ethnic and inter-communal violence is now on the rise, and there is reason to believe that the events that precipitated the escalation of violence in Muttur and Vallachchenai (in the Eastern Province) were not spontaneous but manipulated to achieve political objectives. The end result was to deepen the rift between the Muslims and the Tamils.

The study consulted a number of media personnel, government officials, civil society stakeholders, peace activists, journalist's associations, members of the Norwegian facilitation team, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and members of academia to fathom the complexities of media in the North-East of Sri Lanka. All the interviews quoted in the study have the specific approval of the interviewee.

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<sup>8</sup> See also An Operational Framework for Media and Peacebuilding, Ross Howard, IMPACS, 2002

## The Current Impasse

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The LTTE has recently been at pains to explain that the decision to suspend the peace talks was neither a withdrawal from the peace process nor a hastily implemented action. According to the LTTE, the exclusion of the organisation from the recent international donor meeting in Washington DC, attended by the Sri Lankan government, was only one among several reasons that had prompted the withdrawal from the peace talks. The primary motivating factor, the LTTE has stated, is the absence of significant progress in alleviating the hardships of the people caused by the war.

This view is in contrast to the general belief that the LTTE's decision was motivated only by disappointment at being excluded from the Washington aid conference held on 14 and 15 April. Indeed, the LTTE may have been hoping that by honouring the cease-fire agreement for 14 months it deserved a place at that conference. Colombo has been a successful fundraiser of late, securing USD 800 million from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The LTTE's exclusion from the Washington meeting has demonstrated that the path to international legitimacy, in a US-dominated world in which terrorism is anathema, is going to be a difficult task.

With its refusal as yet to renounce violence, as the Irish Republican Army has in Northern Ireland, and its continuing practices of child recruitment and targeted assassinations of Tamil political opponents, the LTTE was destined to fail the US test. But the LTTE's position is not irredeemable, and there is much that it and the government can do together in partnership to ensure that the LTTE gains the legitimacy it seeks.

At present, however, the problem is that the LTTE's withdrawal is unlikely to be viewed favourably by the international community. Already, the United States and France have urged the LTTE to return to the negotiating table. The Indian government has also expressed its wish that the peace process continue without delay. Despite its protestations that its decision to suspend participation resulted from deliberations over a long period of time, the LTTE's abrupt withdrawal has cost it international credibility. The imperative must therefore be for the LTTE to re-engage with the peace talks. If solving people's hardships is the goal, there is no alternative to the negotiating table.

In a recent meeting with civil society leaders<sup>9</sup>, the Head of the Political Wing of the LTTE, S.P. Tamilchelvan referred to three types of broken promises. The first concerned the resettlement of displaced persons and the constraints that the army's presence in inhabited areas posed to such resettlement. The second was the lack of financial support for resettlement and reconstruction. The third was the undermining of the partnership between the government and LTTE due to the one-sided participation at the Washington aid conference.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the LTTE must recognise that there is a political price that it is paying for its suspension of the peace talks just prior to the much planned Tokyo donor conference in June. It could lead to a weakening of the LTTE's political credibility and a widening of its lack of political parity

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<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.himalmag.com/2003/may/commentary\\_sl.htm](http://www.himalmag.com/2003/may/commentary_sl.htm)

with the government. The Japanese government, which has invested its international credibility in the peacemaking sphere, is not likely to be pleased.

As such, the LTTE pull-out of the peace talks is a problem that needs to be jointly addressed by the government and LTTE in partnership with the international community, before the peace process is itself fatally weakened.

These factors informed the study as well. Meetings with the LTTE were conducted via email since they were reluctant to speak in person about the role of the media. The study was also conducted in the period leading up to the Tokyo Donors Conference – where all major stakeholders to the conflict in Sri Lanka were pre-occupied with issues related to the participation or non-participation at the said event.

However, what was widely acknowledged was that the media in the North-East in particular serves as a pivotal institution in exacerbating conflict or helping the process of conflict transformation. The study has no concrete answer(s) to the prevailing problems of the media in the North-East, but through its work and observations, has identified several areas in which timely interventions may help transform the role of the media from one that is divisive to one that is constructive, trans-ethnic and unifying.

# MEDIA IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE

## Brief description of the region

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Over several decades relationships between the island's people deteriorated due to severe political tensions, and this erupted into armed conflict two decades ago. Now emerging from this conflict, the country is marked by profound schisms, lack of interpersonal contact, and lack of understanding. The path to peace and harmony remains arduous.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Northern Province. The armed conflict created over 800,000 internally displaced persons from the North East, each with their special circumstances and needs. Some of the displaced remain within that region and some are in other parts of the island, each with their special circumstances and needs. At the start of 2002, some 180,000 IDP families had been forced to seek accommodation within and outside the north east—more than 40,000 residing in welfare centres and the others with families or friends. Overall, at least a quarter of a million families have been uprooted, many experiencing several displacements. In addition there are significant numbers of displaced people outside Sri Lanka. While the whole population of Sri Lanka has suffered from the consequences of the war, the North East has borne the brunt of the conflict.

Deep fractures have been created in the social fabric and ethnic tensions have been accentuated. The North East (Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara Districts) constitutes 29% of Sri Lanka's area and is estimated to have had a population of fewer than 2 million in 2001 (about 11% of the national total). Due to large IDP movements (past, and anticipated) population figures cannot be precise. The population is largely rural, with an estimated 88% living outside the principal towns (Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Kilinochchi, Ampara, Mannar and Mullaitivu). In 2000, it was estimated that the region accounted for about 6.6% of overall GDP.

Prior to the conflict the region was dominated by its agricultural, livestock and fisheries sectors. These were, relatively, twice as important to its economy as in the rest of the island, and 80% of its population depended directly or indirectly on such activities. Now the North East has moved from being a net exporter to a net importer of food. The unemployment rate is thought to be more than double the level in the rest of the country. Some 350,000 houses need rebuilding or construction.<sup>10</sup>

These immediate humanitarian needs have obviously shaped the media in the region. While the readership for print media remains high, the socio-economic hardships determine the news value of stories and reportage. The progressive positive picture of the peace process in the Government media is often challenged by the harsh realities on the ground, as reported by regional media. Private radio and television have far greater credibility than State media. However, the lack of job security and the

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<sup>10</sup> See Assessment of Needs in the Conflict Affected Areas, May 2003, ADB, World Bank and United Nations. Available for download from [www.peaceinsrilanka.org](http://www.peaceinsrilanka.org)

threats to the lives of many journalists in the region seriously undermine international covenants on press freedom and the freedom of expression.

#### Field Work

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Summary of discussion with:

University of Jaffna

#### Participants:

Mr. Mohana Das – Vice Chancellor

Mr. Gopalakrishna Iyer – Dean, Faculty of Arts

There is no balanced media in the reporting in the North East. The media in the North East do not seem to know how to engage with the dynamics of the peace process.

A series of seminars and workshops will be held as part of the Danida Project (with UNESCO as the implementation agency) to build the capacity of media in the North East. Danida will rehabilitate a building in the Jaffna town for this purpose. There will be a media laboratory in this building. It is the Vice Chancellor's opinion that while the work on the building continues, it is possible to begin the training programme for journalists in the University itself. This will build momentum and lead to a greater interest in the project. This initial work will lead to an academic programme in the University and even lead to a Diploma. Depending on the success of this initiative, the University might even consider upgrading the project to a Degree programme.

Resource persons will be from Colombo and from abroad. Course development will look at initiatives and syllabi of South Asian media training institutes. The University was interested about possible linkages with the Media Training Institute in Colombo. The trainers who were part of the Media Training Institute in Colombo were flagged as possible resource persons for Jaffna.

At present, the University does not have a Media or Communications Degree Programme. However, the University does conduct external classes on media. It is probable that these classes will dovetail into the objectives of the Danida project and ultimately lead to an academic programme in the University. This degree programme can take place within the faculty of Arts or even a new Faculty although it is still too early yet to say in concrete terms what the University intends to do.

Classes at the Danida programme will mainly be for journalists, but will also include non-journalists. There is palpable interest in a programme of this nature amongst the media in the North East. The

University thinks an initiative of this nature is valuable even with the unsteady progress of the peace process. Capacity of journalists would bode well even in times of conflict. Also, the University believes the project to be academic in nature and not political ensuring a measure of success even if the peace process falters.

Placing the Danida project in context, the participants to the discussion said that the media in the North East placed an emphasis on the immediate problems of people on the ground. Unlike media in the South, the media in the North East showed an interest in reporting the Sinhalese perspective. Despite this, the Tamil media reflected the same ethno-centric bias of that one could find in media in the South as well. About 50,000 newspapers are sold per day in Jaffna. Most of the Colombo based English and Sinhala newspapers also make it Jaffna, albeit in small numbers and extremely limited readership and circulation.

### Journalists' duty to safeguard people's rights

by Jaffna special correspondent

Saturday, 19 October 2002 (Daily News)

It is the journalists' duty to safeguard people's rights and activate the peace process, said Danish Ambassador Michael Stonburg.

"We hope that in collaboration with the Jaffna University we could produce journalists who would be defenders of democratic rights", he said at the inauguration of the Danida Media Resource and Training Centre in the Northern province. It was inaugurated in collaboration with the University of Jaffna and with funding from the Royal Danish government. The ceremony was held at the University of Jaffna. The Ambassador said they were in Jaffna to promote peace and democracy.

Vice Chancellor Prof. Balasundarampillai who presided, said Scandinavian countries have been donors to Sri Lanka for years.

The Rs. 180,000 donation by the Danish government to set up a training centre for northern journalists is praiseworthy. The first stage of training would facilitate journalists to follow a Diploma course in journalism.

The second stage will offer opportunities for media men to graduate in journalism for the University of Jaffna, he said.

He said Jaffna is the only region in Sri Lanka that can boast of publishing four dailies in Tamil.

"In addition, we have religious monthly journals published by Christians, Catholics and Hindus. We also have the rich tradition of publishing the first newspaper in Tamil about 150 years back", Balasundarampillai said.

S. Kathirgamathamby, President, North Sri Lanka Journalists' Association thanked the Danish Ambassador and the Vice Chancellor for fulfilling the long felt need in the North.

Prof. Gopalakrishna Iyer, Dean of the Faculty of Arts proposed the vote of thanks.



The Red Cross has already conducted some workshops on media in Jaffna. Guest speakers, from Colombo and abroad, have spoken to journalists in the North East on problems in the media. Capacity training of journalists is an important as basic training. As such, there is a need to teach journalists about conflict sensitive reporting, child rights, gender rights etc.

Summary of discussion with:

Coordinator of Danida Project, University of Jaffna

Participants:

Prof. Rajaratnam Sivachandran – Dept. of Geography

Re-iterating most of what was said in the earlier meeting, Prof. Sivachandran said that the development of the curriculum for the project had already begun.

Speaking in general about the media in the North-East, he said that newspapers in the North East reflected Sinhala opinion to a greater extent than Tamil opinion was featured in the newspapers in the South. However, he said that articles from the Lankadeepa are often translated into Tamil newspapers.

‘Dedunna’, the voice of the LTTE in Sinhala, is, he said, a very high quality publication. However, ‘Dedunna’ cannot be bought off newsstands in Colombo – the paper is delivered directly to individuals. A lot of people read this paper since they are interested to find out more about the LTTE psyche. There are some peace activities in the South who contribute to this paper as well.

Summary of discussion with:

Jaffna Journalists Association

Participants:

Mr. Senathirajah Jeyananthamoorthy (leading Tamil journalist in Jaffna) and members of the Jaffna Tamil Journalists Union

The lack of personal security was identified as a dire problem facing journalists working in the North East. Many journalists in the North East had to endure frequent death threats and intimidation, and the relevant authorities seemed incapable of giving adequate protection. One of the aims of the Jaffna Journalists Association (JJA) was to highlight these flagrant human rights violations against journalists in the media – both locally as well as internationally.

## Police yet to investigate attack on home says Batticaloa journalist

[TamilNet, June 04, 2003 10:37 GMT]

“The Sri Lanka Police have not taken any action so far to investigate the grenade attack on my house in Valaichenai on Jan. 7 this year. I lodged a complaint at the Valaichenai Police station on the morning after the attack, in which an attempt was also made to set fire to my house”, said Mr. Senathirajah Jeyananthamoorthy, a leading Tamil journalist in the east giving evidence before a commission inquiring into attacks on media persons in the northeast Wednesday.

The special committee appointed by Sri Lanka’s Media and Defence Ministries heard the evidence of Mr. Jeyananthamoorthy during its sittings in Jaffna town Wednesday.

The committee was sent to the north following representations by the Jaffna Journalists’ Association (JJA) urging Colombo to investigate and put an end to attacks on Tamil media personnel in the northeast.

Continuing his evidence, Mr. Jeyananthamoorthy said: “No one can enter the Valaichenai bazaar at night without the knowledge of the Sri Lanka army units that patrol area. And the persons who lobbed a grenade on my house couldn’t have ever slipped back through the bazaar following the explosion because of the army patrols and the proximity of the fisheries harbour military camp. An Islamic extremist group threatened me on several occasions in before this incident”.

“Many Muslim home guards in the Valaichenai-Oddamavadi area who were involved in harassing and killing Tamils were absorbed into the army and Police. I feel that there might be anger towards me in these quarters over a series of articles about destroyed Tamil villages I have been writing to the press. Some of these villages such as Miravodai and Thiraikkerni were subjected to atrocities by Muslim home guards. I exposed the destruction and massacres that they perpetrated. ”

“I have also been threatened by Sri Lanka army personnel in the course of carrying out my duties as a journalist”, Mr. Jeyananthamoorthy told the committee in his evidence.

The Committee is chaired by Mr. Oliver B Weerasena.

Mr. Jeyananthamoorthy queried the committee whether it could take any tangible action to investigate and bring to book the perpetrators of attacks on Tamil journalists.

Members of the committee, however, informed him that they could only report to the Ministries which appointed them and that it is up to the higher authorities to take further action.

There is almost no infrastructure for the media in the North East – little access to computers, almost no access to the Internet, and extremely poor pay. A full time journalist only gets Rs. 3,500 to Rs. 4,000. Trainee journalists are paid Rs. 1,000 a day, which is ironically more than what they get as full time journalists. Journalists also do not receive Employees Provident Fund (EPF) or Employees Trust Fund (ETF), which exacerbates the job insecurity. Most media organizations in the North East do not encourage journalists to join trade unions or any other organization other than the one they are employed in. This prevents journalists from collectively fighting for their rights.

The journalists also face constant harassment by the police on account of a proper lack of documentation, which they are having problems with getting in the first place. The ceasefire process has completely forgotten the media, and there is no guarantee of personal security to journalists covering public events in the region.

There is a desperate need to build the capacity of journalists. There is absolutely no training at present, and the majority of media personnel in the North East have no formal training in journalism. Because they have no formal training, journalists have problems with language and interpretation, lack knowledge on how to conduct interviews and research, how to be conflict sensitive and have little or no awareness of the complexities of the peace process.

However, if the University of Jaffna does start a programme to build the capacity of journalists in the region and especially if it is a diploma programme, there will be great interest in this course amongst regional journalists. Any degree or diploma course and its contents should be formulated and designed in collaboration with journalists in the North East.

There needs to be more communication and co-operation between all the journalists' associations in Sri Lanka. It would be a valuable exercise to have an exchange of journalists from journalists from the South and from Jaffna – to share problems and to learn from each other. This exchange could take the form of a workshop where both groups of journalists address problems that are common and explore options to resolve other pertinent issues. A series of these exchanges could lead to a greater understanding between the two language media and serve to breakdown stereotypes and ethnic bias.

The JJA is eager to work in collaboration with other organizations to build the capacity of journalists in the North East, as long as the intervention is sustainable. It was also pointed out that along with the help of an organization like the FMM, the Union should also try to link up with international organizations like IFEX. This would also enable small groups like the Union have a greater impact on the freedom of expression and the protection of the rights of journalists.

The most popular media in Jaffna, according to the JJA, is Shakthi TV and Hiru, the Voice of Tigers (about 6 - 7 hours of programming daily), BBC and the Uthayan Newspaper. Some of the Indian terrestrial TV stations can also be seen in the peninsula, though State TV coverage is still poor.

Summary of discussion with:

Northern Journalists Association

Participants:

Mr. S. Kathirgamathamby, President of the Northern Journalists Association

If one looks at the English media in the South, the capacity of the journalists in the North East has to be built up to an equal level. Journalists in the North East need to improve their writing and investigative skills and also need to study areas such as conflict sensitive journalism.

Although some journalists have attended workshops in Colombo and developed their skills, most of them have not had this exposure. Furthermore, media organizations often do not send Provincial journalists to workshops in Sri Lanka or abroad to develop their skills.

Coupled with the growth of newspapers in the region, there has also been a growth in the number of journalists. If these journalists do not receive any training, it does not bode well for the future of the media in the North East.

The NJA have participated in a Conflict Sensitive Journalism Workshop held in Colombo a couple of months ago by the Centre for Counter Conflict Journalism and the American Center. They had found this workshop very useful and it was also their first introduction to conflict sensitive journalism. However, many organizations that conduct capacity building workshops in Colombo or abroad do not invite journalists from the North East – as such, they do not even know of current programmes that work towards enhancing the capacity of journalists.

With a stable and lasting peace elusive and the return to war a constant threat, many independent journalists in the North East fear that if there is a return to armed conflict, their lives may be in danger from both the Army as well as the LTTE. This inevitably affects the quality of their reporting from the field. Journalists also have to have to face frequent threats and intimidation from armed groups in the region.

The capacity of journalists in Jaffna needs to be built up. Although there are visits by Ministers and many promises made, few journalists in the North East have access to a telephone, let alone fax and email. Also, very few journalists from the North East have had the opportunity to go to the South.

Even after 15 months of a ceasefire, there is still no interaction between media in the South and the North. Journalists in the North East would like to meet colleagues in the South, visit newspaper houses and generally exchange experiences.

Furthermore, full time journalists get approximately Rs. 3,000/=, which is simply not enough to make a living. Basically, there are 3 problems:

1. Lack of training and the need for capacity building. Lack of any exchange programmes between South and the North East.
2. Job security
3. Personal security

Though there have been some NGOs who have tried to build capacity in the media in the North East, these efforts have not been sustained. Computer equipment worth about 6 lakhs have been given to the Northern Journalists Association, there has not been any follow up. Although the NJA has discussed the need for workshops on capacity building with these NGOs, there has not been a positive response.

There are very few members of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) since most are part-time journalists. This is because the salaries are so appalling that they need to look for work outside of the media.

#### Media Statistics for the North East

Shakthi TV and radio are the most popular electronic media in the peninsula. There are also some terrestrial Indian TV channels which can be seen in the North East. The Sri Lanka Army sometimes re-broadcasts Star Movies, albeit with a limited reach.

Uthayan has the largest circulation in the North East, about 20,000 copies daily. All the English newspapers sell below 500 copies a day in Jaffna. Sunday Times sends around 2,000 copies, and the Sunday Observer about 500. The Daily Mirror also sends around 100 copies daily. Around 50 copies of the North-East Herald come to Jaffna daily.

The State Telecommunications Authority (Sri Lanka Telecom) is extremely corrupt, and many journalists face great hardships when they want to get a telephone or get email connections. This has hampered the capacity building of journalism in the North East.

The University of Jaffna has not had a sustained consultative process with working journalists when designing the Media Training Institute in Jaffna. However, any course should address the lack of

capacity of journalists in the North East. Furthermore, working journalists should be part of the programme – the course material and structure should not be only theoretical, but should also engage working journalists to build existing capacity.

Summary of discussion with:

Committee to look into attacks on Jaffna Journalists

Participants:

Mr. Oliver Weerasinghe – Chairperson and other members of the committee

In what was an extremely short interview with the Committee, conducted during a brief intermission during their public hearing on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2003, the Committee mentioned that their yardstick of media freedoms in the North East was the situation in the South, where journalists have more freedom.

Committee to hold inquiry into assault on Jaffna journalists

[TamilNet, May 28, 2003 00:15 GMT]

The United National Front (UNF) government has appointed a committee to conduct inquiry into the alleged assaults in the past few months on three Tamil journalists by the Police and Security Forces in the Jaffna district, media sources said Tuesday.

According to Jaffna media sources, three journalists Messrs S. Thavachelvan, K. Sivapalan and S. Manohararasa had been severely assaulted by members of security forces at different occasions in recent times when they were engaged in covering events for their news agencies.

The Ministry of Mass Communications has informed the Jaffna district secretariat that a committee of inquiry would conduct investigation into the complaints made by the Jaffna District Journalists Association regarding the assault on its three members by the police and members of the armed forces.

The inquiry will be held on June 4,5, and 6 at the Jaffna district secretariat, sources said. The Committee will be headed by retired District Judge Mr. Oliver Weerasinghe, sources said.

When it was pointed out that the committee should base their interpretation of media freedom on international covenants and guidelines, the committee agreed that it was a good idea, and that they would look into it.

Furthermore, the committee stated that their final report would not be a public document, but would be handed over to the Ministry of Defense. Even if a complainant had evidence to clearly identify the perpetrator of an incident, the committee lacked the power to name this person or group of persons. They were only mandated to give a series of recommendations in their report.

It was entirely unclear how they would determine whether a journalist in the North East had more freedom than a journalist in the South. While the integrity of those sitting in the commission is not in question, the *raison d'être* of setting it up in the first place is highly suspect as is any impact the final report of the Commission will have on improving the working and living conditions of journalists in the North East.

### Committee to investigate into attack on Batticaloa journalist

[TamilNet, June 01, 2003 02:08 GMT]

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has directed a committee headed by retired Judge Oliver Weerasinghe to investigate into the grenade attack on Batticaloa district journalist S. Jeyanthamoorthy who escaped injury in January when unknown assailants hurled a grenade into the journalist's home, sources in Batticaloa said.

The committee is to begin hearings in Jaffna Secretariat between 4 June to 6 June, legal sources said.

The committee will also conduct hearings during its Jaffna sessions on the assaults by security forces on three Jaffna journalists, K. Sivapalan, S. Thavachelvan and S. Manoharajah, sources said.

The Ministry of Defence has sent letters through the Information Department to the involved journalists requesting them to appear at the hearings and provide testimony on the assaults.

Jaffna Tamil Journalists Union has intensively lobbied the Prime Minister to conduct inquiries and to safeguard the Tamil journalists from being assaulted by the security forces. The Journalists union also alerted the Committee for Protection of Journalists (CPJ) and other international media organizations to act to protect Tamiljournalists.

## Dark Shadows on Sri Lanka's Media Freedom

Mon Jun 9, 9:13 AM ET

Champika Liyanaarachchi  
OneWorld South Asia

Media freedom in Sri Lanka is once again clouded with doubt after the office of an opposition-run weekly newspaper was bombed on Friday.

The attack on the "Lakmina" newspaper run by the People's Alliance party, which is known for being critical of the government, appeared to be aimed at preventing the publication of exposures of two cabinet ministers.

While it has put a question mark on the image of the government as a "media friendly" one, there is also speculation that the attack was an outcome of rivalry between factions of the People's Alliance.

Says Sunanda Deshapriya, spokesperson of the Free Media Movement, "Not all may agree with the style of writing and media standards maintained by Lakmina. But we strongly condemn the attack as a clear violation of the right of expression."

However, Deshapriya is of the view that one cannot point a finger at the government without hesitation because the Lakmina was also highly critical of some members of the People's Alliance.

Last week, senior People's Alliance member and former aviation minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle announced his intention to sue the party newspaper and slapped a demand of US \$ 100 million for alleged defamation.

The attack on the Lakmina office in Colombo came barely a week after the government appointed a special committee to inquire into attacks on media persons in the North and the East.

The committee was set up in response to a long-standing demand by the Jaffna Journalists Association. It was appointed by the Defence Ministry on a request from Media Minister Imtiaz Barkeer Markar and is chaired by Oliver B. Weeraratne, a retired judge.

However, journalists in the North and East think the committee is only an eye-wash.

According to Velupillai Thavachelvam, the president of the Jaffna Journalists Association, the committee "discourages journalists from identifying attackers and there's no procedure to name and shame the perpetrators."

Thavachelvam, the local correspondent of the London-based International Broadcasting Corporation, was a victim of a grenade attack when covering a protest against a rival group of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in December. He was hospitalised with serious injuries. "When giving evidence before the committee last week, I told its members that I can identify the person who lobbed the grenade at me. But to my surprise they said that it was unnecessary!" he says.

"The committee chaired by a Sinhalese does not want to see a Sinhala cop being implicated by a Tamil," alleges Thavachelvam, adding that other journalists, too, have been discouraged from naming the perpetrators.

There are an estimated 350 full-time media personnel and about 500 freelancers in the North and the East. Most of them - 85% - are minority Tamils, while about 10% of them are Muslims.



Apart from complaints of harassment by troops and the police, the media, especially the Tamil press, are subject to attacks by the LTTE.

In August, the LTTE destroyed the office of "Thinakathir" (Daily Sun Rays), a newspaper run by an NGO that was critical of the group's alleged human rights violations.

The LTTE has restricted the sale of another Tamil newspaper, "Thinamarusu" (Daily Beat), which has been critical of the rebels and is published from Colombo. Newspaper sellers in the North and East have received death threats and vehicles used to distribute the newspaper have been destroyed.

The LTTE's intolerance has made other Tamil papers, including those based in Colombo, ignore the attacks on "Thinamarasu" and "Thinakadir". That's only led to more criticism.

"If the Tamil journalists are independent they should have reported the pathetic plight befallen on their colleagues of these papers and other gross human right violations of the LTTE," says Bandula Jayasekara, a Sinhala journalist working for The Island newspaper.

The attack on the Lakmani office came only a day after a senior police officer allegedly threatened R. Thurairatnam, president of the Sri Lanka Tamil Journalists Alliance and the Eastern Journalists Association. Both the media bodies that Thurairatnam chairs have condemned attacks on journalists by troops and policemen.

Defence Secretary Austin Fernando acknowledges that the setting up of the committee may be seen as favourable treatment to Tamil journalists because there's no such panel looking into attacks on journalists in seven other provinces.

"Journalists irrespective of their ethnicity and locality have suffered a lot" says Fernando.

But he promises that "north or south -- those who violate the rights of media will definitely be brought to book."

# MEDIA IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE

## Demographic characteristics of the region<sup>11</sup>

The eastern region consists of three administrative districts: Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee, which cover 20, 14 and 11 Divisional Secretary's divisions respectively. The region covers 15 percent of the total land area of the country and has around 7 percent of the population of Sri Lanka. It has a 368km long coastline in the east. The region is predominantly an agricultural area where the majority of the population is engaged in paddy cultivation and other minor crops. The fishing industry plays a vital role due to the length of the coastal belt. Animal husbandry is also one of the major sectors in the region.

Table 1: Population figures for Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee 1981 and 2001

District	1981	2001
Ampara	389,000	589,344
Batticaloa	330,000	515,707
Trincomalee	256,000	354,553
Total	975,000	1,459,604

Table 2: The ethnic composition of the population in the Eastern region in 2001

District	Sinhalese	Tamils	Muslims	Others	Total
Ampara	231,771	111,590	245,089	1,894	589,344
	39.3%	18.8%	41.6%	0.3%	
Batticaloa	571	384,112	130,864	160	515,707
	0.1%	74.4%	25.4%		
Trincomalee	106,011	113,376	134,376	1,064	354,553
	29.9%	31.9%	37.9%	0.3%	
Total	228,353	607,804	510,329	3,118	1,459,604
	15.6%	41.6%	35.0%	0.2	

Table 2 reflects the ethnic distribution of the population in the eastern region. Muslims are 8 percent of the total population of Sri Lanka and they are scattered all over the island. In the combined North-East, they constitute 18 percent of the population and in the multi-ethnic east they number 35 percent of the population. The Sinhalese are a significant minority in the eastern region and constitutes 16 percent of the population in the eastern region but are the majority population in the rest of the country. The Tamils are dominant in the northern region and is the majority population in the eastern region. Tamils are a significant minority in the south of the country. These demographic features demonstrate the inter-dependence of each community on the other.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the socio-political dynamics of the region also see *Enhancing Human Security in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka*, by Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe, available online at [http://www.cpalanka.org/roadmap\\_programme.html](http://www.cpalanka.org/roadmap_programme.html)

Muslim grievances against Tamils begin to gain ascendancy and intensity after 1984-85. Before this period, there was a general concern that the Tamils had denied a specific identity of the Muslims.

Nevertheless, it is only after the Indo Sri Lanka Accord that Muslim agitation and concerns takes on added intensity. A critical point of departure here is that Muslims complain that neither the Indian nor the Sri Lankan government consulted the Muslims when signing the Indo Sri Lanka Accord. The agreement that President Jayawardene made with Rajiv Gandhi and the enactment of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which created, merged North-East Council was seen by the Muslims as a grave political mistake. They complain that the referendum, which was promised by President Jayawardene as to whether the merger should be made permanent, has not happened after 15 years. They argue that merged North-East Provincial Council is disadvantageous to the Muslims in that their number becomes diluted in such merged North-East Provincial Council.

The Muslims are also bitter about their experiences with the Provincial Council which was governed by a coalition of Tamil Militant organizations led by the Eelam Peoples Liberation Front (EPRLF) This was a period of grave hardship for the Muslims. Muslims felt that during that period Muslims were expelled from their land and homes and faced extensive discrimination.

The most significant traumatic event for the Muslims remains the forced eviction of the Muslim population from the Northern Province within 48 hours (in 1990). Furthermore, the attack on the Mosque in Kathankudy, attacks on Mosques in Eravur and other places of religious worship and attacks on civilians in many parts of the Eastern Province, remains fresh in the minds of the Muslims.

A serious grievance of the Muslims also pertains to the forcible eviction and takeover of over forty five thousand acres of cultivable land from the Muslims and handed over to the Tamils during the last decade. These lands are alleged to be in Pottuvil where a large estate in Komari and Thirukovil belonging to Rasul Muslim. Trusts was appropriated and handed over to Tamils. Significant extents of land are alleged to be appropriated in Eravur, Kathankudy, Vallachenai and Akkaraipattu.

The Muslims also claim that the dominant Tamil ideology is that the land belongs to the Tamils and that the Muslims are allowed to cultivate the land or fish in their waters. They say that this ideology permeates the consciousness of young Tamils including the LTTE.

The Muslims retain a fear of ethnic cleansing through a LTTE dominated Provincial Council. These fears are a result of their experience in the expulsion of Muslims from the North, their experience of the short lived Provincial Council and threats posed to them by the LTTE in the recent past. The continued harassment of Muslims particularly with regards the imposition of unlawful taxes; abductions and ransom serve only to reconfirm these fears.

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<sup>12</sup> For a succinct description of the 'Muslim Question' see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/2381015.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2381015.stm)

A significant issue is the fact that local elections were not held in the Eastern Province although elections were held in the Ampara district for the Sinhalese. Elections were not held for Muslim local bodies whereas elections were conducted in Sinhala dominated local bodies in the Ampara district.

The most serious concern for Muslims remains their concerns about their security and the position in a future Interim Administration. They argue that the LTTE is engaged in consolidating their power in the Eastern Province, through the establishment of the Eelam Police, an Eelam Judiciary and Banks.

These concerns have led the Muslims to demand separate Provincial Council for the Muslims. To quote Rauf Hakeem in a recent statement, "The ultimate demand of the Muslims is for a separate Council in the North-East. Muslims should be offered a non-contiguous administrative unit covering all Muslim areas in the two provinces.

#### Field Work

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Summary of discussion with:

Kattankudy Media forum  
49, Beach Road,  
Kattankudy

#### Participants:

Mr. M.S.M. Noordeen – President  
Mr. Malavi S.M.M. Mustapha - Secretary  
Mr. A.L. Fulululla - Vice President  
Mr. M.S.A. Majeed - Director Information  
Mr. R.T.M. Anas - Deputy Director of Information

In Batticaloa district there are around 15 Muslim journalists and around 30 in whole eastern province. The Kattankudy Media Forum is connected with Muslim Media forum, which has more than 400 members around the country. Another Muslim media organization in the eastern province is the South Eastern Media Association situated in Nindavoor, Akkareipattu.

The Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association has not contacted the Muslim journalists of Eastern province to join them or to conduct any sort of joint activity.

Tamil Media in Sri Lanka is openly biased and supports the Tamils and Tamil nationalism. Muslims do not consider themselves part of the Tamil nation in Sri Lanka. They are a different ethnic group, with their own national identity.

All mainstream Tamil language papers are owned either by Tamil entrepreneurs or by the State. None of the mainstream newspapers (in English, Sinhala or Tamil) give fair coverage to Muslim affairs.

Further, they do not give enough space to Muslim points of view. In short, there is no voice for Muslims among the mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka.

Some times the media distorts facts regarding Tamil- Muslim issues. War has brought untold suffering to the Muslim people and they too live in fear. In 1990 many schools situated in Muslim areas were destroyed, there were mass killings of Muslims and many were driven from their homes. However, the Tamil press has not reported these problems.

Muslim journalists are not invited to attend the LTTE press conferences and as a result, cannot raise their concerns with the LTTE.

Even the government-owned Tamil-language newspaper, Thinakaran has not published reports sent by Muslim journalists. The Muslim community in the East faces many problems - the current peace process has failed to tackle these issues properly.

When incidents are reported in which Muslims in the East face discrimination, these reports are not published. For example, late last year (around August) Muslim pavement hawkers, who had been selling goods in the Tamil town Kalavanchikudy for around 40 years, were run out of town by the LTTE. When this incident was originally reported it was ignored by media editors. Then when the LTTE area leader Kaushalya was interviewed on the incident and said it was not the LTTE who forced the pavement hawkers out from Kalavanchikudy this denial by the LTTE made front page headlines in Thinakaran. This is despite the fact the original expulsion of the Muslim traders had been ignored by the same newspaper.

Till date, there has been no resolution to the problem of Muslim pavement traders in Kalavanchikudy, but this is a fact that has still not been reported. According to Muslim sources this kind of problem didn't exist before the peace process.

The other two Tamil language dailies do not even have reporters from this Muslim area. "Tamil journalists are also biased towards the LTTE - so those two newspapers do not get the other side of the story from here."

"When we ask the Editors of the Thinakaran they tell us that orders coming from above prevent them from publishing our stories. This is a peace censorship!"

Muslim journalists complained that even the BBC Tamil language broadcasting programme (Tamil Osei) is biased towards the Tamils and LTTE. They claim that when Tamil Muslim clashes took place in Valachchenai last year it only gave the Tamil side of the story. Buttressing this claim is the fact that the BBC also has no Muslim journalists from this area.

Some of the Muslim journalists have completed the Journalism Diploma Course at the South Eastern University. Capacity building among the journalists is important especially in the context of conflict sensitive reporting. In other areas of the Eastern provincial journalists haven't had exposure to opportunities and learning experiences. Building understanding and open relations between Tamil and Muslim journalists is very important. Muslim journalists we met were all very keen on hearing the

perspective of LTTE leaders with regards peace building, conflict transformation and enhancing the Tamil-Muslim relationship.

A further complicating factor is that provincial journalists are paid only for the stories published, rather than for work submitted. This, of course, encourages journalists to write the kind of stories they believe are more likely to be published. According to Muslim journalists working in the East, this does not include news which is negative about the peace process, such as difficulties faced by Muslims since the cease fire agreement in February 2002.

Summary of discussion with community leader:

Mr. U.L.M.N Nubeen – Peace Coordinator, Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)

Peace in Batticaloa should mean peace between Tamil and Muslims too. Other-wise there will be no peace.

Tamil language media is creates problems and misunderstandings between the Tamil and Muslim communities. They do not help in mediating and solving problems. These are not problems created by Tamil people but by Tamil journalists.

Tamil people and Muslim people want to live together but organizations create problems among them. Mr. Nubeen said he had explained problems of the Tamil media to the LTTE and said they had understood the problem.

There are some Tamil journalists who keep making unfair accusations of the Muslim community and have their stories published without seeking Muslim opinion. Even when we send rejoinders they are not published. Muslims have no right of reply in Tamil newspapers.

We have a land problem in the Eastern Province. We are 25 % of the population but we have only 2% of the land. So when we asked the government to redistribute land under the Mahaveli Irrigation Scheme to Muslims, the Tamil newspapers distort the story.

Muslim people have been expelled from 33 villages in the Eastern province. During the peace process Tamil language newspapers have neglected this issue entirely, and there has been no constructive dialogue on this problem. We cannot go back to those areas.

Muslim people also face a serious security problem after the peace process started, but it has not been discussed in the Tamil press.

Most of the administrators in the province are Tamil. We have asked to appoint Muslim deputies but it hasn't happened yet. This issue too hasn't been reported in Tamil press.

These newspapers give a lot of prominence to violence but not to discussion of the root causes of this violence. We don't read Sinhala newspapers and do not know how they report these issues.

Discussion with:

Mr. Moulavi M.M.S. Ahmed - prominent religious and civil leader in the city

The media can make and break peace. In the peace process the Tamil media is not playing a balanced role. If we need the participation of Muslim people in the peace process, this situation has to be remedied soon.

A group of Moulavis had returned from Jaffna yesterday. They had met with LTTE leaders who were very receptive to the concerns and fears of the Muslim people. They had invited all the Muslims expelled by them in 1990 from Jaffna to return.<sup>13</sup> (In 1990 around 40,000 Muslims who had lived in Jaffna for generations were expelled by the LTTE giving them only 24 hours to pack and leave.)

But to go back we need to be assured of two conditions.

1. A welfare and rehabilitation programme for returnees
2. If war should break out, that Muslims would not be targeted by the Government or the LTTE.

We are positive about locating solutions for problems facing Muslims through a process of dialogue and discussion with the LTTE. We should make media aware of our problems and ways and means to find peaceful solutions.

None of us want to go back to war again.

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<sup>13</sup> A joint communiqué between the leader of the LTTE, V. Prabhakaran and the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) signed on the 13th of April was quite comprehensive. A Joint Committee was to be established to facilitate the return and resettlement of Muslim refugees, the return of lands appropriated by the LTTE and facilitate the return and cultivation of such lands by the Muslims, to stop forthwith the extortion of funds and other forms of harassment, the separate and distinct identity of the Muslims were recognised.

## Discussion with Eastern Journalist Association

N. David - Secretary

R. Thurairathnam – President

The Eastern Journalist Association has 65 members. Journalists, aware of the dangers of working in isolation and under threat in this unstable region, felt that only by coming together as an association of journalists could they support each other.

There was a consensus that most of the Tamil language newspapers support peace.

But all Muslim (owned) news papers are anti-peace. They are mostly pro Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)<sup>14</sup>. Engal Desam, a newspaper published by the SLMC supporters in Colombo is openly anti-peace.

The Government-owned Thinakaran newspaper gives fair and balanced coverage to Tamil and Muslim issues. Weerakesaree has a Muslim deputy editor, Ameer Hussien. Thnankural is openly pro Tamil. Sudaroli, which is from the Jaffna-based Udayan group, gives prominence to LTTE news and photographs.

Tamil journalists working in the Eastern province face constant threats from militant groups (para-military) and state forces. Some journalists have had to change their houses after attacks from allegedly Islamic extremist groups.

While articles are submitted on the issue of child soldiers, they are not published in Tamil language newspapers. Experienced Tamil journalists have become correspondents in Tamil journals abroad, where they publish stories on child soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

Lately, child rights in general have become an issue and cases of child abuse have been reported from the Batticaloa area. The LTTE is very harsh on child abusers and punish them severely. If some one is sentenced their punishments are publicised and the flogging is usually done openly.

The Batticaloa area itself has around 10,000 child soldiers. However, child soldiers are not the only problem related to children. Batticaloa is a very poor district and children of poor families are widely and openly given as domestic servants. Children working as domestic labour do not have any rights. Some times children join the LTTE to escape these situations. When the LTTE released some of its child soldiers some of them went back to the LTTE. Others do not have any place to go.

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<sup>14</sup> For a background to the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) visit <http://www.slmc.lk/>

<sup>15</sup> However, the English language press does regularly cover child conscription by the LTTE



However, this is not to justify child recruitment. However, the perception that with no schools in some areas and dire conditions at home, some families feel their children get a better start with the LTTE, and have access to some sort of education, cannot be ignored.

We work with Muslim journalists and our Vice-President is a Muslim Journalist from Kattankudy.<sup>16</sup> We need to develop more mutual understanding with the Muslims.

We as an organization very much like to participate in activities that enhance the skills and capacities of our journalists. Workshops can be organized in Batticaloa since there are residential facilities here for this.

We like to meet journalists from South and exchange ideas on war and peace. We want to establish working relationships with journalists from the South. Reconciliation among journalists is of utmost importance.

We want to establish working relationships with journalists from the South. Reconciliation among journalists is of utmost importance.

We would like to enhance our technical knowledge, especially on web-based knowledge. Most of us use e-mail and sometime use voice telephony as well. We need more training and capacity building on these aspects of Information Technology. Conflict reporting training is also one area we like to work on.

None of us want to go back to war. But if war breaks out most of us working in government controlled area would be in danger. Some of the para-military groups have already threatened us saying that although their hands are bound for the time being their eyes are wide open to see. We need solidarity to protect our rights as journalists.

Discussion with:

S. Sivaram - Editor, North Eastern Herald  
S. Jeyamoorthy - Journalist

LTTE is working to build bridges with Muslim community through Muslim civil leaders especially through religious leaders (Moulavis). This is very apparent. Their aim may be to deny the Sri Lankan government the space and opportunity to divide Tamil speaking people - that is the Tamils and Muslims. The strategy of the Sri Lankan government has been to divide and rule.

The problem with Muslim journalists is that most of them have been bought over by Muslim politicians. The late SLMC leader M.H.M. Ashraff started it and current leaders of SLMC are continuing that policy. So they have become part of the political establishment.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> That the vice-president is a Muslim journalist was noted in both discussions with Tamil journalists although when we met the Muslim Vice-President he complained that the Tamil journalists never included him in decisions.

There are Muslim extremist groups who try to harass and control media and the Muslim community has to come to grips with these developments.

There are three small Muslim (owned) newspapers published in Colombo. They are Meel Parvei (monthly), Navamani (weekly) and Muslimkural (weekly). By and large only Muslims read these newspapers. But if we want to transform media culture mainstream media we need to change their bias attitudes. Meel parvei is considered to be a middle of the road, balanced newspaper. Navamani reports on Tamil issues too and Muslimkural focuses on Muslim affairs.

In eastern province the LTTE publishes the full-colour weekly newspaper called Tamil Alei of which five issues have been published till date. It reports on Muslim affairs by interviewing selected Muslim opinion leaders and has a print run of approximately 2000 copies. It has taken over the staff of Thinakkadhir, which was a daily published in Batticaloa and had to close down after its office was ransacked allegedly by a LTTE group.

Discussion with:

Vanni Journalists Association

Participants:

Mr. Ponniah Manikavasagam – President, Vanni Journalists Association

The authors met Mr. Manikavasagam prior to their fieldwork for the present study, as part of a project on advocating the Right to Information. However, his comments are equally relevant in the present context.

- He believed that the capacity building of journalists needed to concentrate on those in the North-East. When compared to journalists in the South, they said that the protracted conflict had debilitated the work and skills of journalists in the North-East.
- He spoke of the need for training in ICT and electronic media. These they said, were tools that many of them did not know how to utilise to their fullest potential.
- He also spoke about the lack of information on the conflict, human rights violation, casualty figures and statistics, money spent on development activities in the North-East, the opaque taxation system of the LTTE etc as areas in which legislation ensuring the right to information would invariably help.
- Journalists in Vavuniya he said, were very keen to get training on Information Technology. They had identified IT to be a key tool for journalists, and said they would be grateful for any training they received in this area.

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<sup>17</sup> It was not entirely clear how this policy began or how it is manifested in the Muslim media

## KNOWN DETAILS OF LTTE MEDIA

Though the LTTE was approached by the authors, both in person and via email, they did not respond in time for the publication of this report.

### Voice of Tigers begins FM broadcast

By V.S. Sambandan

COLOMBO. Jan. 16. The Voice of Tigers (VoT), the radio of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) today started its controversial FM transmission in northern Sri Lanka amid mixed political reactions and continued apprehensions that the broadcasts would reach pockets in southern India. The twice-a-day broadcasts — 6.30 a.m. to 8.00 a.m. and 7.p.m to 10 pm — were heard by residents in the northern Jaffna peninsula.

Rebel-held northern Sri Lanka follows the IST, rather than the Sri Lankan time which is 30 minutes ahead of IST. For its daily broadcasts, the VoT has lined up a variety of programmes, including a Sinhala slot. On all days, both the transmissions start with a two-minute 'invocation to martyrs' (maaveeravanakkam).

In addition to listeners' choice, regional issues, programmes for farmers, sports events and dramas, slots have been provided for programmes such as songs of the motherland (thaayaga paadalgal) and "lessons from history" (varalaaru sollum paadam). Three news bulletins have also been scheduled daily.

According to sources in Jaffna, the transmissions, still on an exploratory basis, are expected to go "Eelam-wide" in a few days. Though the VoT has been on air since November 20, 1990, the broadcasts from today are with a stamp of legality, following the grant of a license by the Government late last year.

In line with a recent trend of marking the deaths of senior cadres and leaders with an Indian involvement, today's commencement of FM broadcasts was timed to commemorate the death anniversary of Kittu, who blasted himself in 1993.

Before the VoT was started as a clandestine operation in the 1990s, the Tigers ran an experimental TV, Nitharsanam, between 1985 and 1987.

The dynamics of the troubled peace process at the time of the study was perhaps responsible for this silence. The assassination of a prominent Tamil politician and leader of a group opposed to the LTTE in Jaffna, along with the destruction of an LTTE craft by the Navy posed serious threats to the stability of the fragile ceasefire. In this context, it was perhaps impossible for the LTTE to devote any time for our questions. However, the political imbroglio that at present threatens to break down the ceasefire

agreement is inherently linked to coverage of issues that have a negative impact on the peace process. Unfortunately, the authors failed to convince the LTTE of the need to look at the media as a pivotal aspect on the on-going peace process.

However, it is the hope of the authors that the LTTE will continue to support endeavours to engender a free media in the North-East. Reproduced below is an article by Jehan Perera, Media Director of the National Peace Council, published in *Himal* in January 2003. The article highlights the problematics another situation which threatened to derail the peace process, and served to drastically reduce the public perception of the unpartisan nature of Norwegian facilitation in Sri Lanka.

(See [http://www.himalmag.com/2003/january/commentary\\_sl.html](http://www.himalmag.com/2003/january/commentary_sl.html)).

## Transmitting controversy

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Jehan Perera

The Sri Lankan debate on the peace process is a pessimistic one, opined Professor Johan Galtung in mid December at a seminar on peace journalism organised by the Sarvodaya Movement in association with the National Peace Council and the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections. Galtung, a world-renowned authority on conflict resolution and a pioneer in formulating peace concepts, came to Sri Lanka at the invitation of the Sarvodaya leader, Dr AT Ariyaratne, and his speech was at least partially an appeal to his old friend and civil society more generally. Speaking at a gathering of journalists, Galtung urged his audience to cultivate a spirit of optimism and take it to the country at-large.

There are pessimistic and optimistic ways of looking at matters. Religious teachings have often been a source of optimism for human beings, whatever may be their rational or irrational basis. They provide hope that the future can be positive even when the present is negative, thereby inducing people to work hard for a better tomorrow. While finding fault with the present peace process on many grounds, including the issue of the Voice of Tigers radio transmitters, Galtung urged optimism in working through the problems and finding solutions to them.

In his address, Galtung drew a distinction between war and peace journalism. In war journalism, which is the kind practised by most journalists covering conflict situations worldwide, there are two important questions: who did it, and who is winning and losing? War journalism tends to focus on what is negative and what causes hatred. As a counterpoint, Galtung discussed peace journalism, which is based on two different questions: what is this problem about, and how can it best be resolved? Good journalistic practice, he said, combines both types of reporting.

Considerable journalistic energy has been expended in recent weeks over the shipment of radio equipment to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Wannai by the Norwegian embassy in Colombo. The discovery of the shipment, and the appearance of Norwegian partisanship colouring it, led to calls for the expulsion of the Norwegian ambassador by extremist Sinhala parties. Premier

Wickremesinghe has also been the subject of opposition party anger, which has included allegations of treason. Despite being a Norwegian himself, Galtung was very critical of the Norwegian embassy's role in the radio transmitter affair.

No clarification

Undoubtedly, it would be a great improvement if the LTTE engaged in a dialogue with Sinhalese through radio waves rather than in military assaults of the kind that have caused large-scale loss of life affecting families in both the north and south. Strengthening the LTTE's radio transmission capabilities at this time would help it in political, not military, work. This would help the LTTE to strengthen itself politically at a time when it is expected to make the difficult transition from a military organisation to a political one.

From the viewpoint of peace journalism, the controversy over the radio equipment is an opportunity to understand the complex set of issues inherent in the peace process. The circumstances under which the Norwegians came to be involved in the import of the radio transmitters and their clearance past customs authorities have not yet been clarified by either the Sri Lankan government or the Norwegian embassy. This needs to be done without further delay— people have a right to know what has actually happened. Until such time, speculation can be expected to take the place of facts.

Some background information, however, is available at this time. Even before signing the ceasefire agreement and especially since, the LTTE has been trying to get its point of view across to Sinhalese. The LTTE feels that at present only part of its message reaches the Sinhalese public, and even that is filtered through the perception of Sinhalese-owned media. In recent months, the LTTE has made an attempt to address this problem by publishing a monthly news-paper in Sinhalese called *Dedunna* (rainbow).

Another potential LTTE strategy to reach the Sinhalese people was the use of the radio waves. A few months ago, there was some informal discussion about the possibility of the LTTE getting time on SLBC state radio to broadcast its message to the whole of Sri Lanka. Obviously, these broadcasts would have been within the framework of the ceasefire agreement and the larger peace process. Southern-based development NGOs, ruling party officials and media personnel with government links participated in these preliminary discussions.

Providing the LTTE with a programme on the SLBC channel would have enabled it to reach a much larger audience than setting up its own radio channel to broadcast to Sinhalese. A radio programme on SLBC would have permitted interaction with Sinhalese audiences through a question-and-answer format in which Sinhalese listeners could have voiced their concerns to the LTTE and received responses. The LTTE's current effort to publish a Sinhalese newspaper has not been very successful, given that it reaches very few people. A similar investment in an advertising supplement in a large circulation Sinhalese newspaper would garner a much larger readership.

At a subsequent stage in the discussions, it is likely that higher-level government contacts were made. It is probably at this later stage that the prospect of providing the LTTE with radio transmitters capable of reaching beyond Wanni was broached. In its election manifesto, the ruling party promised to

establish an interim administration headed by the LTTE in the north and east, which is similar to what its predecessor in office, the People's Alliance (PA), was contemplating before losing power in 2001. The ultimate aim of both parties has been to transform the LTTE into a political organisation with Norwegian facilitation.

#### Bad timing

However, there is valid cause for concern over the undemocratic way in which the government and the Norwegian embassy are assisting the LTTE's bid to strengthen itself politically. The LTTE is currently making a major effort to suppress the political activities of its Tamil rivals in the north and east. The LTTE-backed campaigns of intimidation against the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), and its insistence that the EPDP should vacate the north and east, cannot be justified by the criteria of democracy and justice that the peace process is meant to restore. Further, the murder, torture and disappearance of Tamil political activists in the north and east are reprehensible and should be stopped immediately.

One of the opposition's main charges against the peace process is that it is based on a one-sided compromise and appeasement in which the LTTE prevails at the cost of the government. The PA, now in opposition, has called for the government to engage in harder bargaining with the LTTE. Certainly, where it concerns human rights, and the freedom to live without fear of being picked up and disappearing, there can be no compromise. It is clear that the present mechanism is inadequate in this respect. A human rights monitoring mechanism needs to be put in place that can name, shame and put a stop to such abuses.

A further problem concerns the involvement of the Norwegian embassy in securing the radio transmitters for the LTTE. As the facilitator, it is important that the Norwegians maintain an image of neutrality in the eyes of the general public. Even if the Norwegians were requested by the Sri Lankan government to facilitate the provision of the radio transmitters, the mere fact of such assistance without an explanation damages their image of neutrality in the eyes of the people.

Conflict resolution theorists have developed a concept of 'insider partial' mediation. This concept seeks to explain situations where a third party mediator is partial to the parties whose conflict it is trying to resolve, even at the expense of others, such as the EPDP and other Tamil parties, who are outside that process. In this instance, however, there is a danger that the general public will see the Norwegians as having acted in a way that is partial only to the LTTE, which is not the complete picture.

The Norwegian government is a major source of developmental and technical assistance to Sri Lanka, regardless of whether the island is headed by the United National Party or the PA. It is not as if it is helping only the LTTE. Both the government and the LTTE have repeatedly expressed their gratitude for the Norwegian role in bringing about the ceasefire and taking the peace process forward. But there are other parties that need to be brought on board, the most important of which being the general public.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Several shared concerns emerged in all the interviews and discussions that the authors had with journalists in the North-East. It is imperative that these shared concerns are addressed in a holistic manner, since they are inextricably entwined and very hard to compartmentalise. The authors stress the need for all efforts at building the capacity of media in the North-East to be coordinated, sincere and sustained. The following recommendations outline some areas where intervention is desperately needed.

1. Improving relations between Tamil and Muslim media communities, and thereby the wider communities

The media is not seen as a shared space by the Tamil and Muslim journalists in the North-East. Especially after the outbreak of violent conflict, interactions between the media of these two communities have been dismally low. After the ceasefire agreement however, there have been two parallel tendencies. Communal media in the East has become increasingly insular, though there is also recognition amongst members of Muslim and Tamil Media Associations that greater cross-communal interaction amongst journalists could in time lead to a greater understanding of the need to develop a more conflict sensitive media.

Joint reporting activities could help in this respect, along with workshops and field training on conflict sensitive journalism for audiences and groups which do not only have journalists from one community or ethnic group. CPA, aided by USAID-OTI, has already begun a series of activities which takes journalists from all language groups in Colombo to areas of communal violence to conduct practical conflict sensitive journalism workshops.<sup>18</sup>

As was brought out in some of the interviews, the mere fact that workshops have journalists from different communities creates the foundation for greater understanding – as such, the value of a sustained series of inter-communal media dialogues in the North-East cannot be underestimated. These dialogues could take the form of meeting where problems are discussed and joint problem solving encouraged, or the form of workshops, where capacity building of journalists recognises the realities of different communities.

One possible output could be model newspapers or newsletters that incorporate some of this inter-communal media dialogue. This will engender the creation of a shared space in an alternative media that helps build confidence amongst journalists in the region, if properly disseminated.

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<sup>18</sup> The model newsletter of the first workshop in Muttur is available at [www.cpalanka.org/media.html](http://www.cpalanka.org/media.html)

2. Supporting the Muslim and Tamil Journalists Associations in defending the rights of journalists in the North-East.

Support for associations representing journalists in the North-East cannot be limited to supporting the association of any one ethnic group. It has to be recognised that supporting the activities of any one association might be perceived as biased and partisan, thereby hurting already fragile media relations in the region.

Support could be in the form of office equipment or workshops on capacity building. The financial capacity of media associations in the North-East differ widely, and some are not even able to afford a fax machine or computer. Providing these facilities, with proper consultation and sensitivity to ground realities, could greatly help the associations and their work.

Associations should also be helped to formulate a clear mandate for their activities. Some associations, although having the potential to defend the rights of journalists in the North-East, do not have a clear idea of their core competencies, vision or guiding principles. Key members of media associations in the North-East should be given training on the basics of media rights and ethics. All associations must be helped to work collectively to safeguard rights of the media in the North-East.

Associations also suffer from the poor training of their constituent members. Training programmes, workshops, dialogues which help build the capacity of journalists will help these associations better represent the concerns of media in the region. Developing the capacity of association also helps engender confidence in them amongst journalists not already part of them. Encouraging journalists from Colombo and the South to approach and work with media associations in the North-East will also help highlight the concerns of the North-East media in the mainstream media in the South. This North-South dialogue is essential in the longer process of improving media standards in Sri Lanka. Sustained initiatives of this nature, which address concerns of journalists in the North-East as well as those in the South, open up new areas for collaborative strengthening of media standards and ethics.

3. Development of monitoring and advocacy activities

Journalists in the North-East have very little access international bodies such as IFEX or IFJ. Media associations themselves have little or no access to international media rights lobby groups. As such, the realities of journalism on the ground in the North-East are rarely reflected in international fora.

Dovetailing with initiatives to help build the capacity of media associations in the North-East, organisations like IFEX, IMPACS, IMS and IFJ can help develop media monitoring and advocacy skills in the North-East.



As media often construct rather than reflect realities, it is important to monitor the media, especially in the North-East, on their capacity to capture fairly, accurately and responsibly, the dynamics of polity and society in the region.

Given their poor or non-existent training, journalists in the North-East have to be encouraged to be impartial in their reporting. Premised on the understanding that media monitoring can help the media better understand the necessity for improved reporting guidelines and standards, interventions should concentrate on looking carefully at the reporting of regional media in the North-East.

Workshops to build the advocacy capacity of journalists in the North-East can feed into media monitoring exercises.

#### 4. Safety training for journalists working in the North-East

Safety is a positive quality, part of getting the job done well and quickly; an asset, not a liability. The job of the journalist is to tell the story, not to become the story. A journalist who puts him or herself needlessly at risk is behaving in an unprofessional manner; one that could ultimately prevent the story being told or the picture being seen. Some correspondents, photographers and camera operators in war zones embrace a macho culture and a competitive urge for danger. But good journalism is about delivering reliably, not about getting an adrenaline high. Reckless journalists put at risk the lives of the informants, drivers and interpreters who make it possible for them to work. And sometimes the risks can be for nothing. Getting closer to the action does not always make for better reporting, as the case of embedded journalists in the recent Iraq conflict shows.

These aspects, however, are alien to the vast majority of journalists in the North-East. Many journalists have lost their lives covering a story, and many others, even after the ceasefire agreement, still remain the targets of para-military and other armed groups. Journalists in the region have no awareness of the existence of documents such as A Survival Guide for Journalists by IFJ<sup>19</sup>.

Based on such valuable training material and international field experience, workshops and dialogue between civil society organisations and the media in the North-East could help engender a more safety conscious attitude amongst journalists. Workshops can be based on existing texts, or can even be based on the sharing of information between journalists in the region.

However, a culture of safety has to be coupled with a media culture that builds trust amongst communities. Trust building activities like team reporting must also be conducted in order to create a knowledge sharing network amongst journalists in the North-East.

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<sup>19</sup> See [www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org) for further information

The authors of this report call for interventions in safety training for journalists in the North-East must be based on the following principles which have also been endorsed by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ).

- a. Journalists and other media staff shall be properly equipped for all assignments including the provision of first-aid materials, communication tools, adequate transport facilities and, where necessary, protective clothing;
  - b. Media organisations and, where appropriate, state authorities shall provide risk-awareness training for those journalists and media workers who are likely to be involved in assignments where dangerous conditions prevail or may be reasonably expected;
  - c. Public authorities shall inform their personnel of the need to respect the rights of journalists and shall instruct them to respect the physical integrity of journalists and media staff while at work;
  - d. Media organisations shall provide social protection for all staff engaged in journalistic activity outside the normal place of work, including life insurance;
  - e. Media organisations shall provide, free of charge, medical treatment and health care, including costs of recuperation and convalescence, for journalists and media workers who are the victims of injury or illness as a result of their work outside the normal place of work;
  - f. Media organisations shall protect freelance or part-time employees. They must receive, on an equal basis, the same social protection and access to training and equipment as that made available to fully employed staff.
5. Build professional standards capacity (to bring them on par with internationally accepted norms of professional reporting)

The professional standards capacity of journalists in the North-East is extremely poor. Perhaps easily explained by the complete lack of any formal training in journalism or standards based reporting, there is an unhealthy bias towards sensationalism and partisan reporting.

Media in the North-East is in dire need of a sustained programme of conflict sensitive journalism that takes into account the ground realities of the region. Any programme must reflect the dynamics of the media in the region, and cannot confine itself to theory alone. As was stated earlier, CPA is already engaged in a series of workshops in the region, though there is scope for more interventions especially between journalists of the North-East.

Conflict sensitive journalism can dovetail with the initiatives of the Media Research and Training Centre (MRTC) setup in the University of Jaffna and funded by Danida (with UNESCO as the implementing agency). However, there is much scope for interventions in the East as well, involving journalists who will otherwise have no access to such training (even with the introduction of the MRTC). The vast gamut of training resources that are available to CPA and other organisations can be used to develop programmes for journalists in the North-East, provided they are translated into the vernacular.

It is important to note that training on conflict sensitive journalism is a long-term process – the success of which cannot be determined in the short-term. As such, it is important to have a long-term perspective in mind when developing interventions on building professional media standards in the North-East. Ad hoc short-term projects will have limited impact, and the cumulative result of many such un-coordinated short-term interventions will be a cynicism amongst journalists in the region who will resist such interventions in the future. This has to be avoided at all costs, since winning the trust of journalists in the North-East should be a pivotal factor in any programme or media intervention.

For long-term sustainability, it might be useful to look at a programme which trains trainers, who will take over from international or regional partners after a period of time and carry on capacity building and training amongst journalists in the North-East by themselves. A body of such trainers, who are proficient in the vernacular, is a much needed resource in the North-East, where very often, organisations based in Colombo or abroad do not have the human resources or financial capacity to carry out long-term programmes.

6. Provision of basic computers and telecommunications equipment for journalists in the North-East, along with IT skills training

Ironically, even some of the journalists who had access to computers said that they desperately needed training in IT skills and online research. One contributing factor to the isolation of the media and journalists in the North-East is because they do not have access to the Internet or basic telecommunications. Many media associations do not have an email address, and some do not even have fax machines or telephones. While the telecommunications infrastructure has developed during the ceasefire agreement (while still not on par with the network in the rest of the country) many journalists simply do not have the financial resources to afford computers.

However, it must also be said that past attempts at giving PCs to journalists have also resulted in failure because of a complete lack of any follow-up. This report eschews the facile notion that merely providing computers will help build capacity of the media in the North-East. As was stated before, a holistic approach is necessary – computers need to be go hand in hand with skills training, capacity building and programme support that helps journalists (at least for a certain period of time, measured in years, not months) maintain the equipment that they have been provided with.

While organisations such as the British Council in Sri Lanka have mobile IT skills training, these resources have not been utilised by the journalists in the North-East.

IT development could also take the form of an internet portal of which all the media association in the North-East region are a part of. Furthermore, recent initiatives at building an information network for key stakeholders in the peace process of Sri Lanka has taken note of this problem, and intends to create virtual private shared spaces (using a software tool for peace building called

Groove)<sup>20</sup> to engender communication and knowledge sharing amongst journalists and media associations connected to the Internet in the North-East region.

These efforts have to be taken note of in planning any future activity in the region. Already, there is palpable dissatisfaction amongst some groups that there was a lack of proper consultation when giving computer equipment worth 6 lakhs to a certain media association in Jaffna. Strangely, the media association which was the recipient of this equipment also complain that despite repeated requests, there has not been any follow-up in the form of training or capacity building amongst journalists in the association.

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<sup>20</sup> For further information contact Sanjana Hattotuwa, who in his personal capacity is the Coordinator of a team (still at an embryonic stage) which will create an information network amongst key stakeholders in the peace process in Sri Lanka. He can be reached at [hatt@wow.lk](mailto:hatt@wow.lk).

## DETAILS OF ORGANISATIONS

### Centre for Policy Alternatives

#### Who we are

Media freedom, the public's right to know and the individual's fundamental right to freely hold and express opinions are inextricably linked with good governance and democracy. The Media Unit in CPA was constituted to further CPA's objectives of formulating policy options to inform and shape the practice and culture of governance in Sri Lanka. The Media Unit examines hopes to engender a socially responsible media by examining the content and form of media coverage, and by publishing 'Media Monitor', a journal highlighting problems with media reportage in Sri Lanka.

The Media Unit has worked with International Media Support (Denmark), IMPACS (Canada), the PressWise Trust (UK) and a number of Sri Lankan media institutions, including the Free Media Movement (FMM), the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) and the Editors Guild in its interventions in Sri Lanka.

#### What we do

In 2003, the Media Unit hopes to engage in activities related to the Freedom of Expression, a national advocacy campaign for the Freedom of Information, Suicide Sensitive Journalism, a handbook for Conflict Sensitive Journalism and a project that will look at helping NGOs and civil society organisations engage with mainstream media more effectively.

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## International Media Support

### Our vision

To enhance peace, stability, democracy, freedom of expression and pluralism of the press in conflict and conflict threatened areas through rapid assistance to media practitioners and media institutions. The long-term strategic vision of International Media Support is to contribute to peace, stability and the development of democracy in conflict and conflict threatened areas. This is achieved through rapid interventions to promote and strengthen press freedom and professional journalism and to improve the working conditions of local journalists and media practitioners. The aim is to allow the population in endangered areas to exercise their right to express themselves freely - also in times of crisis.

### Our principles of operation

- IMS is committed to freedom of expression and related international human rights standards endorsed by the international community. IMS provides support to media, which promote democratic development
- IMS promotes conditions for professional journalism to develop. IMS is a support mechanism for professional peers and strives not to be affiliated with unethical journalism
- IMS promotes the role of the media in de-escalating rather than escalating a conflict
- IMS provides assistance to independent media and to other media related institutions where professional journalism can be promoted

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