

Local journalists who speak out against human rights abuses fear for their lives and the world press turns a blind eye.

It is now over a year since the president of Sri Lanka, [Mahinda Rajapaksa](#) , claimed victory over the [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam](#) (LTTE). But war is still being waged on the "paradise island" – by the government, against the country's journalists.



Lasantha Wickrematunge lies in state during his funeral ceremony in Colombo. Photograph: Lakruwan Wanniarachchi/AFP/Getty Images

Last week alone saw one media outlet receive a threatening letter and the head of another charged with fraud by the supreme court after publishing stories critical of the government. And two international NGO workers involved in protecting journalists had their visas revoked.

The situation has been deteriorating for some time. According to [Amnesty International](#) at least 14 media workers have been killed in the country since 2006 and more than 20 are thought to have fled – more per capita than have left Iran. Arbitrary arrests, abductions and assassinations have been documented for over three decades. No one has ever been prosecuted for these attacks on the media.

In January last year, as the Sri Lankan army closed in on the last remaining pockets of resistance held by the LTTE, the government imposed a media blackout on the war zone. (It also denied humanitarian access to civilians trapped by the fighting and, like the rebels, displayed callous contempt for civilian life.)

Away from the killing fields, the local media suffered a sharp spike in attacks. Just days after independent broadcaster MTV was raided by gunmen, [Lasantha Wickrematunge](#) – editor of the Sunday Leader and prominent government critic – was assassinated in broad daylight in a high-security zone regularly patrolled by the army.

The end of the war has changed nothing. Phones are tapped. Emails hacked. Media outlets harassed and journalists threatened. One – [Prageeth Eknaligoda](#) – has been missing since January's presidential election. Small wonder that so many journalists say they now resort to self-censorship.

And they are not the only ones who live in fear. NGO workers, lawyers, members of the opposition – the culture of impunity puts them all at risk. The state has also ramped up its vitriol against external critics: last week [a cabinet minister began a hunger strike](#) and orchestrated a siege of the UN offices in Colombo in response to the secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, setting up a panel of experts to advise him on accountability for alleged war crimes during the final stages of the civil war last year. The minister has since ended his "fast to death" amid growing speculation that the protests were supported, if not sponsored, by the government.

All this is happening under the noses of the world's press. While burning effigies of Ban draw the spotlight for a few days, Sri Lanka's slow descent into dictatorship has mostly gone unnoticed. Global media coverage of the conflict in Sri Lanka during the past four years is about a tenth of that given to Iraq. In 2009, the New York Times and the Guardian devoted four times more space to the Israeli military offensive in Gaza (death toll 1,400) than the bloody end of Sri

Lanka's civil war (estimates range between 7,000 and 40,000 civilian dead). China Daily gave Gaza over six times the coverage, and the Independent Newspapers group in South Africa over 10 times. All papers ran more articles on Tiger Woods last year than on the Sri Lankan conflict.

This global silence plays into the hands of the Sri Lankan government's apologists, both those who delude themselves and say, as one did in a meeting at London's Frontline Club last week, that missing journalists have merely run off with mistresses, and those who are paid to delude others. The government has spent lavishly on public relations firms such as Bell Pottinger – which counts General Pinochet and Trafigura among its past clients – and its US subcontractor Qorvis, which also represents Equatorial Guinea's unsavoury dictator. The [pardoning on World Press Freedom Day of JS Tissainayagam](#), a journalist previously sentenced to 20 years' hard labour, is part of this PR strategy.

All of us who care about universal values, and freedom of expression in particular, have a duty not to let Rajapaksa's twisted version of events go unanswered. If we do so, we encourage other states to believe that they too can get away with the "Sri Lanka option" – using brutal methods to crush internal opposition, without regard for civilian casualties or international law. It has been reported that leaders from Colombia to Thailand have been following Rajapaksa's "success" with great interest.

Those brave Sri Lankan journalists who continue to seek out and report the truth despite the high risk of "disappearance", torture and assassination, surely deserve the support of their international colleagues. Russian journalist [Anna Politkovskaya](#)'s murder has rightly been denounced around the world. Wickrematunge, who chillingly foretold his own death in an editorial published posthumously, should be no less well known. The [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), a press freedom organisation, rates freedom of expression in Sri Lanka as lower than in Saudi Arabia or Uzbekistan, yet somehow the world – including the mainstream media world – does not seem to notice.

Surely it is time for that to change.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2010/jul/12/sri-lanka-journalists-threatened>