

## Colombo Blacklists Outside Observers

by Angilee Shah

**I**N SRI LANKA'S final push to rout the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), information about what was happening on the front lines was hard to come by. The last week of major military action focused on just a sliver of land in the northeast which was still occupied by what remained of the LTTE. But on May 11 the United Nations estimated that 50,000 civilians were still caught between government forces and the rebels. Gordon Weiss, United Nations spokesperson in Colombo, warned the world that the final surge, and shelling from both sides, was a "bloodbath scenario" coming true. And while Sri Lankan government officials decried what they saw as an alarmist and false analysis, international organizations and journalists were not allowed to see for themselves what was happening on the ground.

The media was barred from the conflict zones as well as the government camps where displaced civilians are still being held. Sri Lankan journalists have faced the most severe conditions. In January, three attacks against prominent journalists and media outlets had a chilling effect on the local press. Lasantha Wickramatunga, the outspoken editor of the *Sunday Leader*, was one of 11 journalists killed this year alone, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a nonprofit organization based in New York.

While the foreign press has operated with relative safety, their ability to witness the war has also been hamstrung. At the end of April, the Controller of Immigration and Emigration, P. B. Abeykoon, said that there is a list of 837 foreigners who are not allowed in the country because they had, according to the Sri Lankan govern-

ment, misinformed the rest of the world about what was happening in the last throes of the island's 26-year conflict. The *New York Times* said in an April 21 report that their repeated requests for visas have been ignored. Jeremy Page of the *Times* in London was turned around at the airport in Colombo, and Nick Paton-Walsh, along with a producer and cameraman for London-based Channel 4, was escorted out of the country for airing a piece that included aid workers' claims of violence in the camps. Human Rights Watch researcher Anna Neistat, who testified before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations about rights violations on both sides of the conflict, is also on the list, according to Mr. Abeykoon. The last remaining independent observer, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), suspended its operations that provided aid to an estimated 280,000 displaced civilians on May 19 because of heavy government restrictions. It has since resumed operations in the largest of the camps, for the 130,000 people at Menik Farm, but is still calling for full access.

The government maintains that Sri Lanka has freedom of expression, but that national security is the first priority. "We do not blacklist people," says Lakshman Hulugalle, director general of the Media Centre for National Security in the Ministry of Defence. "There is no censorship in this country." According to Mr. Hulugalle, foreign journalists are welcome in Sri Lanka, as long as they identify themselves as journalists at embassies and register with the Information Department if they are re-

---

*Ms. Shah is a free-lance journalist based in Los Angeles.*

porting on issues related to national security. “Journalists are free to report anything,” he said in a phone interview from Colombo, “but if it is harmful to national security, we will take appropriate action.” He describes “misreports” and news that is “harmful to the country’s image” among journalists’ offenses.

In a war as long and violent as Sri Lanka’s, however, the news is not always good. While celebrations and felicitations to President Mahinda Rajapaksa for his government’s defeat of the LTTE abounded in Colombo, questions about civilian casualties and conditions in the camps remain. In the last week of fighting, many major news outlets ran stories about shelling in designated no-fire zones. They cited one of the few remaining sources of information from the front lines: government doctors who retreated with civilians and set up makeshift hospitals in the midst of the fighting. Reports on May 10 said that 378 civilians were killed and more than 1,100 were wounded in attacks near a hospital. The next day, close to 50 people were killed and at least 50 more were injured in heavy artillery attacks. The New York Times and the BBC quoted Regional Health Director of Health Services for Mullaittivu, Thurairaja Varatharajah. Several outlets, including the Guardian and the Associated Press, quoted information from Dr. V. Shanmugarajah, a medical officer in the Mullaittivu District. Other reports about civilian casualties and the need for food and medicine in the conflict zone cited Dr. T. Sathiyamoorthy, regional health director of health services for Kilinochchi.

The government denied responsibility for the shelling and called on the press to be skeptical of information coming from

the then LTTE-held territory. “The Government notes that there is no independent verification possible to the tenuous security situation caused by the LTTE’s last-ditch attempts to save itself from military annihilation,” the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights said in a statement. “To treat the statement of any official (albeit one employed by the Government) living under the domination of the LTTE as independent and believable is extremely risky in reaching an objective conclusion on the current situation.” A statement on the Ministry of Defense Web site took a harder line:

*The doctors that risked their lives to tell the world about the crisis have been labeled ‘terrorists’ by Colombo.*

“While the Sri Lankan security forces maneuvering on the final phase of their mission to rescue thousands of innocent Tamil civilians forcibly held by the terrorists in “Civilian Safe Zone,” the media sympathetic to the

terrorists once again have misinformed the international community with another fabricated story.“

Basil Fernando, director of the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Right Commission, says that free expression in Sri Lanka is being equated with terrorism. The people’s “right to participate in discussions about to society” is being crushed, he says. Mr. Fernando characterizes the government’s position on public discourse this way: “Keep quiet because you are not sure who is telling the truth.”

It is certainly true that when journalists cannot witness war for themselves, confirming reports from the government, civilians or aid workers is very difficult. But aid and advocacy organizations have been relying on the doctors’ meticulous reports about needs on the ground since January. Dr. Sathiyamoorthy’s e-mails, for example, contained data on everything

from injuries and deaths to the amount of rice and oil needed for the growing population of displaced civilians. His reports read like patients' charts, diagnosing problems and suggesting treatment. He counted births and deaths, explained that schools and communication channels were not operating, explained which medications were most needed and how many patients the ICRC was able to evacuate. Using limited e-mail access and satellite phones, the doctors sent images and information to Sri Lanka's Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs, as well as to the outside world. The huge numbers of what many believe is a humanitarian crisis often belie the struggles of individuals; it is the details, the personal stories that give the costs of war a face. For many journalists and aid organizations, the doctors' reports provided a glimpse into life in a war zone.

Jeevan Thiagarajah, executive director of a network of organizations in Sri Lanka called the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, describes Dr. Sathiyamoorthy as "extremely dedicated." At great personal risk, "he just felt that he had to do his job," Mr. Thiagarajah says. While it is possible that some of last messages about conditions might have been submitted under duress of the LTTE, Dr. Sathiyamoorthy has been reliable, even conservative with his reports in the past. One aid worker, who asked not to be named in order to safeguard his ability to continue his work, described Dr. Sathiyamoorthy and Dr. Varatharajah this way: "As these two indi-

viduals have highlighted the realities of the crisis to the world, aided the civilians in every way imaginable, facilitated emergency relief and evacuation efforts and refused to leave the conflict zone even though more than 200,000 internally displaced persons have since made their exit, they have undeniably put their lives at risk each and every day."

Amnesty International says the three doctors fled the war zone on May 15, along with 5,000 civilians. When they reached the government camps, Dr. Sathiyamoorthy and Dr. Shanmugurajah were detained by the Terrorism Investigation Department. Dr. Varatharajah was injured and airlifted to an undisclosed location by the Sri Lankan Air Force, according to an Amnesty International alert. Mr. Hulugalle, at the Ministry of Defense, initially denied knowledge of the doctors. "We are not sure about their whereabouts because they are terrorists," he said. But reports in the Sri Lankan press say that the secretary of defense, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, has called on the Ministry of Health to investigate the conduct of all three doctors.

The Cambridge-based advocacy group, Physicians for Human Rights, is calling on the government to release the doctors, and give them access to medical care, legal counsel and family visitation. Senior researcher Richard Sollom said the doctors have done nothing wrong. "It is their ethical duty to be reporting on aspects of the war that concern people's health," he says. The ICRC says they met with the doctors on May 21, but cannot comment further. ■