

**Testimony by Robert Dietz
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Committee to Protect Journalists
Before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Washington, D.C.
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I wish to thank the chairman, Senator Robert Casey, and other members for giving the Committee to Protect Journalists the opportunity to testify here today. The Committee to Protect Journalists is a nongovernmental organization based in New York. It was founded in 1981 by U.S. journalists who were concerned about the safety of their colleagues overseas. Funded by individuals, private corporations, and foundations, the Committee to Protect Journalists accepts no government funds as it works to defend press freedom and journalists worldwide.

My comments here today are based on CPJ's research, including my 10-day reporting trip to Colombo, Sri Lanka, from January 21 to February 1, 2009. I have also submitted a longer version of my presentation to the committee. The report is available on CPJ's Web site, and I understand the committee will make it available online.

I will make some strong accusations against the Sri Lankan government today. Time constraints keep me from giving the supporting evidence, but the report will fully explain the charges I will make.

I went to Colombo because Sri Lankan journalists are under intensive assault. The government has failed to carry out effective and credible investigations into the killings and attacks on journalists who question its conduct of a war against Tamils separatists, or criticize the military establishment. Three attacks in January targeting the mainstream media drew the world's attention to the problem, but top journalists have been [killed, attacked, threatened, and harassed](#) since the government began to pursue an all-out military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in late 2006. Many local and foreign journalists and members of the diplomatic community believe the government is complicit in the attacks.

The aim of my trip was to investigate January's three attacks:

- On January 6, the main control room of Sirasa TV, Sri Lanka's largest independent broadcaster, was destroyed when an explosive device, most likely a claymore mine, was detonated at 2:35 a.m. during a raid by 15 to 20 men.
- On January 8, Lasantha Wickramatunga, the editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper *The Sunday Leader* was killed while driving to work. He was attacked by eight men riding four motorcycles. The attack came about 200 yards from a large Sri Lanka Air Force base, and after the attack the hooded men rode off in

that direction. Although the report from the judicial medical officer—Sri Lanka’s equivalent of a coroner—was to be released on February 6, it has not been made public. The next hearing in Wikramatunga’s case is on March 19.

- On January 23, Upali Tennakoon, an editor at the Sinhalese newspaper *Rivira*, and his wife, were attacked in a manner similar to the attack on Wickramatunga. In this case there were four men on motorcycles. The couple left Sri Lanka soon after Tennakoon was released from hospital.

In all three attacks there have been no credible investigations, minus the coroner’s inquest into Wickramatunga’s death. While many consider the government the prime suspect in the attacks, officials have vehemently denied any responsibility.

The lack of reliable investigation into these crimes is in keeping with [a long history of impunity](#) for those who attack journalists in Sri Lanka. CPJ counts [10 journalists killed](#) by premeditated murder since 1999, with no prosecutions or convictions. The Rajapaksa government and its predecessors must at least be held responsible for the impunity that surrounds attacks on journalists.

Most of the killings came while Rajapaksa served as prime minister from April 2004, through the time he started his six-year term as president in November 2005, until now. According to CPJ’s records, during his time in high office in Sri Lanka, eight journalists have died of what CPJ considers to be premeditated murder. No one has been brought to trial in any of these cases. The number of dead does not include journalists killed in crossfire or other events. The people we are talking about were intentionally killed.

With a failure to investigate and a realistic suspicion that government actors are complicit in the violence against journalists, the time has come for the international community to act.

In a phone call with CPJ, Attorney General Mohan Peiris dismissed the idea of impunity for those who attack journalists: On February 20 he said, “I can tell you we have a policy of zero tolerance, zero tolerance. There is no question of the government or the attorney general’s office accommodating or making concessions for criminals or criminal activities.” Some cases may have been delayed for lack of sufficient evidence, he said.

The attorney general’s response is typical of the hard line of denial from the government. Other officials have said that the attacks are part of an anti-government campaign to discredit the Rajapaksa administration.

While I was in Colombo I spoke with more than 20 journalists. Many of them work in what is considered the “non-government” press, but several wrote for newspapers seen as “pro-government.” I also met with officials from three diplomatic missions, all of whom spoke with me on the understanding there would be no attribution of their remarks. Surprisingly, many of the journalists I spoke with also did not want to be quoted, for fear of retribution from the government. As a journalist, I’m accustomed to following

sourcing restrictions with diplomats, but to have journalists tell me they did not want to be named was an indicator of just how intimidated Sri Lanka's media have become.

I have spoken at length about the attacks on Sri Lankan journalists, but I must address one other issue: No foreign or Sri Lankan reporters have recently been allowed to travel independently to the frontlines of the conflict with the LTTE. Charges of misconduct against both sides have gone uninvestigated by independent journalists. They have had to depend on secondhand information from both sides of the conflict and from the few aid groups that are still able to operate in and around the combat zone. CPJ calls on both sides to allow all journalists to personally assess the risks involved and to travel and report freely from the frontlines of this war, which has taken so many lives.

As I said at the beginning of my address, the full version of my report is available online, but let me close quickly with some of the recommendations at its conclusion:

To the international community:

- Engage with the Sri Lankan government, particularly the president's office, to address what has become a protracted assault on journalists and media houses.
- Insist that the government rein in its security forces, which are believed to be behind not only the spate of attacks in January of this year, but the assaults on journalists critical of the government that increased in late 2006.
- Point out that Sri Lanka's international image has been tarnished, and insist that attacks must be fully investigated by police and the judiciary, unhindered by government pressure. No matter what viewpoint the government holds in its attempts to end the fighting with the LTTE, members of Sri Lanka's civil society who dare to criticize the government must not be treated as the enemy.

To the government of Sri Lanka:

- Provide adequate protection and security for any journalist who is threatened.
- Ensure that those journalists who have fled in fear of their lives or liberty can return home to Sri Lanka in safety.
- Ensure an independent, thorough, and timely investigation of all attacks on journalists.
- Release the full autopsy report on Lasantha Wickramatunga.

To the U.S. government:

- The American Embassy in Colombo is deeply concerned about these attacks on journalists and has often acted in their interest. CPJ calls on the State Department to work with the embassy to consider ways to offer temporary refuge to Sri Lankan journalists who decide to flee their country fearing for their safety, and to encourage other countries to do the same. None of these men and women want to abandon their homeland, their families, and their careers, but they deserve some sort of temporary refuge and support.