

Media in Eastern Province of Sri Lanka Face Formidable Obstacles

A Fact-Finding Report by the International Press Freedom Mission to Sri Lanka

As part of an International Press Freedom Mission to Sri Lanka, two of the seven members of the Mission, drawn from the International Press Institute (IPI) and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), travelled to the Eastern province between June 17 and 21, 2007, to meet with local journalists and undertake a first-hand evaluation of the situation they face. Three colleagues from the Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka, accompanied the mission members to the region.

The first meeting of the mission in the Eastern Province was at Ampara. The journalists who managed to get to this meeting were all from the Ampara-Kalmunai area, Tamil speaking and Muslim by faith. Although representatives from other parts of the Eastern region had been invited, realities on the ground – particularly the unsettled conditions in Batticaloa and Trincomalee – proved a formidable obstacle to those journalists attending the meeting.

1. Overall political context in the Eastern Province

The North and East of Sri Lanka witnessed the worst ravages of the civil war and internal displacement. With direct fighting having abated in the East, the Sri Lankan government seems intent on accelerating the resettlement of internally displaced people (IDPs). Observers who have visited recently pacified areas where resettlement has commenced, speak of serious shortfalls in the official effort. In many cases, the process only succeeds in adding another dimension to the problem of internal displacement. People who were just settling down and beginning to eke out a livelihood in places they had fled to in an earlier phase of the conflict, have now been brought into the East. And the commitment of the Sri Lankan government does not extend far beyond bringing in the displaced. Once relocated in the East, they are left to their own devices, with the government rendering little assistance for the reconstruction of essential infrastructure and civic amenities.

From the perspective of this mission, these aspects of the situation in the East make a powerful case for carrying out the resettlement and reconstruction process under the gaze of the media, within the full knowledge of the wider public. The politics of reconciliation in the Eastern province, which is ethnically and culturally the most diverse in Sri Lanka, would have some chance of success only if all citizens are allowed to participate in public affairs, on the basis of authentic information provided them by the media. Transparency in matters related to land, livelihoods and resettlement in the East is perhaps the most essential requirements for ensuring that the scars of the prolonged conflict are healed.

Yet the situation in the East that the mission members saw was perhaps the opposite of transparent. One telling comment made by a senior journalist at the meeting in Ampara was that when a robbery takes place in the area, the local community is often aware of the identity of the perpetrators. However, the press would be shackled, unable even if it manages to assemble all necessary evidence, to report on the issue. With press freedom under severe pressure, journalists in Sri Lanka's East find that they are unable to fulfil their role, except to record and broadcast the pronouncements of the government and others who wield coercive power in a highly polarised environment. The perspective offered by one senior journalist was that “journalists are reduced to being stenographers for the government.”

2. Segmented media loyalties and restraints on critical reporting

Few of the journalists that the two-member team met seemed optimistic that the current lull in hostilities in the East would be sustained. Most were convinced that the resettlement, with its emphasis on a demographic re-engineering of the Eastern Province, was only sowing the seeds for further conflict. But they were frustrated in their efforts to write about the possible consequences, because of the indifference of other communities and the positive enthusiasm of some, for the demographic re-engineering.

In the Potuvil area of the East, adjoining the picturesque Arugam Bay beach, there has been an effort to designate large tracts of land as a High-Security Zone (HSZ). A portion of this land is being reserved for purposes of “cultural development”. The group was told and has independently verified that there has been a deliberate attempt by the Sri Lankan government to ensconce in certain very salient positions in the region, the cultural symbols of the island nation’s majority faith. While the journalists that the mission met with in Ampara were not averse to symbols of the nation’s majority faith, they had serious misgivings about the *bona fides* of this particular decision by the Sri Lankan government.

Despite being almost unanimous in viewing the Potuvil operations as a deliberate act of provocation, journalists in the Eastern Province were frustrated in their attempts to report on the issues, because of the severely limited reach of their media organisations. *Ingal Desam* and *Navamani* are the two Muslim owned papers published in the Eastern Province and both are weeklies. Of the two, only one managed to face down threats to report on the Potuvil developments.

The journalists that the group met in the East were convinced that they had lost the battle to keep the Potuvil issue in public focus, because the Muslim community lacked a daily newspaper.

The interactions of the mission members with journalists in the Eastern Province provided an insight into some basic predicaments faced by the Muslim community. The issues raised mirrored those heard from Muslim media groups in Colombo: that the community, despite its number and economic bargaining power, does not have a voice. Echoing the point made by counterparts in the East, Muslim media practitioners in Colombo argued that the problem essentially arises from the absence of a daily newspaper that advocates the community’s views.

The repeated mention of this theme suggests that the media as a social institution in Sri Lanka remains too strongly moored in communal loyalties to be able to report and represent a broadly defined “public interest”. Indeed, the absence of serious cross-cultural reporting is a severe barrier to greater media freedoms. As mentioned in a 2003 study on the media in the North-East of Sri Lanka: “there is some reporting of translated articles from the other languages but these articles often are intended to demonstrate pejorative aspects of the other ethnicity”. (Centre for Policy Alternatives, Sri Lanka and International Media Support, Denmark, *Study of the Media in the North-East of Sri Lanka*, page 8).

These problems are especially acute in the East, perhaps the most ethnically mixed province of Sri Lanka. Where most of the country has seen tensions along the Sinhala-Tamil axis, the problem in the East is three-cornered. The Muslim community numbers around 8 percent of Sri Lanka’s total population and 35 percent in the East. Yet they have found themselves an unwanted third party in both war and peace (for an account of this and other political dilemmas,

the recent report of the International Crisis Group is a valuable resource; see: *Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire*, Asia Report No 134, May 29, 2007)

On October 23, the Muslim community organises an annual observance of the day of their mass expulsion from the North by the Tamil Tigers (LTTE). Journalists in the East see no evidence in the media that this is important to the wider public. The LTTE, it was said to the mission, has established a reign of terror amongst the Tamil language media and effectively airbrushed this sordid episode from the nation's collective memory.

3. Barriers to free movement

Journalists in the East insist that they are being deliberately denied access to places such as Vakaraai, Kathiraveli and Kokkadichcholai, and their environs, merely because there is an ethnic reengineering underway there, from which the Muslim community would emerge distinctly worse off.

Media accreditation is insufficient for passage into these areas. Journalists evidently have to establish their ethnicity and prove their loyalty to officially dictated policies before they are allowed access. These aside, there are strong sectarian connections with names in Sri Lanka, so that any journalist, aside from his formal accreditation, also has to produce his national identity card and clear the hurdle of approval – in terms of his language and religion – of local police officials.

The sense of being adrift from the national mainstream was very pronounced among the journalists that the mission met in Ampara. This is a reality conveyed on a daily basis in the form of media accreditation cards, which create a distinct second tier of “provincial” journalists. This “provincial” accreditation by all accounts, serves little purpose. It fails to ensure access to official premises and unhindered travel to news hotspots. Journalists who show a “provincial” or “district” card are required also to produce their national identity card and enjoy no rights of movement and access above those of an ordinary citizen.

These difficulties are underlined by daily reminders that the provincial journalist (as also the district journalist, who mans the media apparatus in the next lower tier in the administrative hierarchy) merits a professional status distinctly inferior to his counterpart in Colombo or any other city in the country. Professional facilities for filing stories and dispatching news photographs are poor in the Eastern Province. Neither do the journalists in the East have permission from local communication authorities to reverse the charges to their news headquarters for any use of public transmission facilities.

The district journalist has essentially to meet these costs out of his own pocket. As one of the participants in the mission's dialogue in Ampara said: this means that the journalist has to pay for the time spent in transmission of his news material, after which he has to ring up the news headquarters to confirm receipt. After all this, the chances of his material being used by the news organisation are slim.

4. Absence of professional solidarity

A lack of concern on the part of editors in Colombo for journalists in the districts and an absence of professional unity, were widely shared perceptions in Ampara. The stories that record the rhythms of life in the districts, enjoy little priority in the national press. Even when there are significant news stories in the province, they are assigned to reporters from the national capital,

rather than journalists resident in the region. In this manner, every news story acquires the flavour of the metropolitan centre, reflecting the concerns of the urban elite of Colombo, rather than the people living in the provinces.

Reporters in the districts invariably have the best local information and contacts and the best means of providing the authentic story. However, these are individuals who function with little formal journalism training and little sympathy or understanding from their news headquarters.

The mission believes that provincial and district journalists need to be able to move freely and that, where appropriate, their reports have to be given due credit and prominence in news reports and daily broadcasts. Yet, this mission is also aware that journalism in the provinces and districts is severely limited by the commercial calculations of media organisations. All the journalists that the mission met in Ampara were part-timers, who were dependent on other sources of income, notably from teaching, for their livelihood. Indeed, it is rare for any major Sri Lankan media organisation to retain full-time staff in the Eastern Province.

Several of the journalists that the mission met in the Ampara-Kalmunai area were employees of the local administration, dependent on this source for the major part of their earnings. As might be expected, this likely compromises their ability to be objective reporters. In the context of the mammoth relief effort mounted in the Eastern Province after the tsunami of December 2004, this has meant that the media could not publicly scrutinise the rehabilitation and reconstruction budgets. Needless to say, corruption was by all accounts, rampant during the reconstruction process.

5. Meetings with Government Agent and Security Head

The mission met with the Government Agent (also known as District Secretary) for Ampara, to assess how responsive the local administration is to the problems faced by media practitioners. The official concerned, who is from the elite cadre of the Sri Lanka Administrative Service, was categorical in his belief that all media credentials are honoured irrespective of their “national” or “provincial” origin. He did not claim though, that he could speak on behalf of the police or the security forces, since these agencies had their own rules for media access.

The mission had two telephone conversations with the Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) in charge of the Special Task Force (STF) in the Ampara area. The STF is a unit drawn from the Sri Lankan police, and tasked with counter-insurgency operations in the North and the East, and its ASP revealed that he has little authority to release information to the media. Discretionary authority had once been available to him in cases that involved no clear security hazard. However, this experience by his account, was not a happy one, since information was found in some cases, to filter through to the insurgent groups. Since then, there has been a policy decision that all media releases on matters connected to the STF and its operations would be centralised in the national capital.

The STF does recommend occasionally, that Colombo sanction visits by media teams to operational areas when there is no prospect of a threat to their safety. Such carefully controlled media visits have recently been organised to areas in the Eastern Province cleared of LTTE insurgents.

Where detention of suspects or their interrogation is concerned, the STF has only contingent powers. The issue of releasing information on arrests does not arise since the STF is obliged to

hand over all detainees within 24 hours to the local police, who then approach the courts for authority to continue their detention.

Discussions that the mission had in the districts were similar to those in the national capital, with the local administration arguing that they were not aware of any specific problems faced by media practitioners. This seems to suggest either an official lack of awareness of the monitoring and advocacy work carried out by organisations such as the Free Media Movement, or a refusal to admit that they merit a high priority.

6. Meeting with Karuna group representatives

The mission met the Ampara district commander of the breakaway faction of the LTTE, formally called the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puli (TMVP) and commonly referred to as the Karuna group.

This took the mission members through the experience of visiting a compound guarded by armed children, adjacent to a school from which the incessant chatter of children at play could be heard. The mission members were received without the least suggestion of hostility, though the Karuna group seemed watchful about media visitors, especially those carrying cameras.

From interactions with journalists in Ampara and Colombo, the mission had identified the Karuna group as a major exponent of pressure on the media in the Eastern Province. For long years, the people and the media in the Eastern Province were caught between the Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE. Today, the Karuna group makes no secret of its close collaboration with Government forces. The pressure on civil liberties and media freedom, though, remains unrelenting, with the Muslim community in the East being especially vulnerable.

The TMVP spokesmen that the group met were categorical in denying responsibility for any threats or obstacles facing journalists. They asserted that had heard of journalists being attacked, but not seen any such incident at first hand, far less carried out any such attack. They argued that they do not conduct security patrols or man security pickets and hence have little control over procedures of access for media personnel.

The Ampara district commander of the Karuna group made no secret of his irritation at some of the reporting on the TMVP. There had been widespread media reporting on a supposed split within the group, with the Batticaloa area commander apparently having declared his independence from the group's supremo, V. Muralitharan, alias "Colonel Karuna". There had also been in his view, a series of malicious reports in the Tamil dailies, *Veera Kesari* and *Thinakkural*, which spoke of the Karuna group as a band of marauders.

A corrective was applied, as the Karuna group commander put it, by "speaking to" the concerned newspapers and asking them to desist. However, the Karuna group said they did not see either *Veera Kesari* or *Thinakkural* as enemies or opponents, though they do seek to convey their own distinctive perceptions to the public through *Tamil Alai*, a newspaper published from Batticaloa.

The mission asked the Karuna faction representatives if they knew of any more formal system of redressal for grievances involving the media. Specifically, the mission mentioned the Press Complaints Commission, which functions in Colombo. Karuna's men seemed rather amused at the thought of going through the formal process of a voluntary complaints system. In this respect, they were at one with the dominant practice in Sri Lanka, since the hectoring telephone

call, and the overt and un-stated threats appear to often be the usual mode of interaction between the media and those in authority, rather than the arduous process of deliberations involving the Press Complaints Commission.

However, in this case, there seemed to be a link with the sense of cultural separateness that pervades the island nation. The men of the Karuna group were fundamentally unconvinced that the Press Complaints Commission could credibly address their problems, because it is a body that, in their perception, is dominated by the Sinhalese. Though based on a misconception, this viewpoint hints at the distance that still remains for ensuring reasonable working conditions for the media in Sri Lanka.

Since the conclusion of the visit, information has been made available by concerned journalists on the ground that distribution of media material has been severely hindered in the Eastern Province. News vendors are understandably adopting a policy of extreme caution since they are anxious about their own safety in an environment where lethal force is not discounted as a legitimate means of achieving political ends.

The police force has reportedly been questioning all practising Tamil journalists in the East, openly seeking to probe their political leanings. Moreover, the Karuna group has been seeking to pressure all journalists competent in Tamil to begin writing for *Tamil Alai*. This does suggest that, irrespective of the veracity of reports on the split within the Karuna group, editorial control over the newspaper remains firmly with the mainstream faction under Colonel Karuna. However, it does not suggest that any improvement in the situation of the working journalists in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka is imminent.

7. Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, the mission would like to make a strong recommendation that editors in the capital should:

- visit the districts more often, to keep themselves informed about the working conditions of practising journalists there; and
- consistent with editorial standards, allow maximum opportunity and space for journalists in the provinces and the districts to portray realities in their immediate environs for the larger media audience.

The mission would also like to endorse the following demands of the provincial and district journalists, which it gathered, reflect their most pressing professional needs:

- permanent and secure jobs, governed by working conditions clearly spelt out in letters of appointments;
- more access to official sources of information and a possible enactment of a right to information act;
- a safe working environment and where necessary, safety training in accordance with global best practices;
- insurance against professional hazards;
- greater awareness and sensitivity on the part of local administration officials and security personnel towards the special needs and importance of media.

8. Composition of the International Mission

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