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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

25 January 2013

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Sri Lanka: Overview of Sri Lankan media sources, including affiliation or association with government or opposition parties (2011-2012)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview of Media Freedom in Sri Lanka

In its report on press freedom in 2011, Freedom House writes that media freedom in Sri Lanka remained "restricted" and that "official rhetoric" is "markedly hostile toward critical" journalists and media outlets (2012). Similarly, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) states that the authorities are becoming increasingly "intolerant" towards the media (12 July 2012).

A 2012 paper on media freedom in Sri Lanka, by Swaminathan Natarajan, a research fellow at the University of Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, indicates that Sinhalese journalists are pressured to take a pro-government stance (2012, 18). Journalists also reportedly practice self-censorship (Natarajan 2012, 20; Freedom House 2012). The media minister reportedly suggested that the media should refrain from reporting on issues that would "damage the integrity" of Sri Lanka (*Ceylon Today* 23 Mar. 2012). According to Freedom House, journalists do not write critical stories about the government, the President's family, or "alleged war crimes surrounding the defeat of the Tamil Tiger rebel movement in 2009" (2012). Similarly, in correspondence with Natarajan, a "well-known" human rights activist (2012, 14) states that both state and private media "accept the government's agenda" with respect to war crimes, accountability, and the actions of the defence secretary and the president (2012, 16). In an interview with RSF, the [then] editor of the *Sunday Leader* stated that

[y]ou can survive as long as you toe the government line. And that is what most media organizations in Sri Lanka have decided to do. Both state and privately-owned media. If you choose to do otherwise the consequences are too big. It's a price that media bosses don't want to pay. (12 July 2012)

In contrast to the above, the BBC states that private media agencies "often engage in political debate and criticise government policies" (23 Oct. 2012).

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), an organization working with national journalists' organizations to improve working conditions for journalists and journalism quality (n.d.), expresses the view that few media sources offer "fair" coverage of the Tamil community because of the risk of being labelled "terrorist sympathisers or 'treasonous' in intent" ([2012]). Tamil papers reportedly censor critical remarks made by Tamil politicians against the government (Natarajan 2012, 16), and their editors reportedly "admit a lack of introspection" with respect to crimes committed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) [also known as the Tamil Tigers] (ibid., 17). Natarajan adds that "the vast majority" of Tamil media in the diaspora are "uncritical" of the LTTE (ibid., 36).

According to the IFJ, news websites with content on Sri Lanka have been subject to "arbitrary rule changes and frequent obstruction" ([2012]). The government reportedly directed all news websites to register with the government in November 2011 (Human Rights Watch 29 Oct. 2012; IFJ [2012]; Natarajan 2012, 36). Five websites that Human Rights Watch describe as "critical of the government" (29 Oct. 2012) were subsequently blocked (Human Rights Watch 29 Oct. 2012; IFJ [2012]). The Supreme Court later dismissed petitions challenging the government order to register, indicating that freedom of expression was "not an absolute right" (CPJ 17 May 2012; Natarajan 2012, 36).

2. Affiliations of English-language Print and Internet Media Sources

According to Natarajan, "the media is highly divided along ethnic lines" and the financial control and ownership of the media "overwhelmingly lies with people who have their own political agenda" (2012, 20). Freedom House notes that, in recent years, media ownership has become more consolidated, with many private outlets having come under the ownership of government officials or their "close associates" (2012). Similarly, the IFJ states that the government has significant control over the media in terms of ownership, spending on advertising, and content decisions ([2012]). The Copenhagen-based NGO International Media Support (IMS), which was

established in 2001 with the aim of "support[ing] local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition" (n.d.a), also states that the government controls most of the private media through "ownership and business influence" (n.d.b).

2.1 Government-owned Media

The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. (Lake House) is a government-owned newspaper publishing house (Sri Lanka n.d.; RSF 23 Mar. 2012). Based in Colombo, it has branches in Kandy, Maradana, Nagegoda, Anuradhapura, Kataragama, Matara, and Jaffna (Lake House n.d.d). It publishes daily, weekly (ibid. n.d.c), and monthly newspapers (ibid. n.d.e), in English, Sinhala and Tamil (ibid. n.d.c). Its English-language publications are the daily newspaper the *Daily News* (ibid. n.d.a) and the weekly *Sunday Observer* (ibid. n.d.b).

According to a BBC Sri Lanka correspondent, "some official outlets like the *Daily News* sometimes cover mild criticism of various government practices" (qtd. in Natarajan 2012, 12). The correspondent expressed his opinion, however, that some state media are "'propaganda channels" that offer "'news' ... dripping in nationalistic ideology" and "full of factual inaccuracies" (ibid.).

2.2 Privately owned Media in Sri Lanka

2.2.1 Ceylon Today

On its website, Colombo-based *Ceylon Today*, which was founded in November 2011, states that it offers an "independent editorial stance" and "reliable, unbiased, impartial and non-partisan coverage of news" (n.d.).

Quoted by Natarajan, the BBC's Sri Lanka correspondent stated in May 2012 that *Ceylon Today* is owned by politician Tiran Alles, but "'shows an independent editorial line'" (2012, 17). The IFJ writes that Alles is a "businessman with interests in a variety of sectors and a longstanding political profile," and was formerly associated with the opposition politician Mangala Samaraweera ([2012]). The IFJ writes of Alles being allied with former Sri Lanka army commander General Sarath Fonseka, whom he supported in the 2010 presidential contest, in "a political formation that is part of the opposition, but regarded by the [opposition United National Party] as a tacit ally of the Rajapaksa regime" ([2012], 10).

Sources indicate that, in June 2012, the newspaper's editor-in-chief was abruptly dismissed (IFJ [2012]; RSF 22 June 2012). RSF reports that the editor was asked to resign with no letter of dismissal, and found three days later that his access to his work computer had been blocked (ibid.). While RSF states that the reasons for the dismissal are unknown, four of the editor's colleagues at *Ceylon Today* reportedly expressed concern to the chairman about "'the persecution ... that has arisen, based on false assumptions of political and ideological affiliations and allegiances'" (ibid.).

2.2.2 Daily Mirror and the Sunday Times

Daily Mirror is owned by Wijeya Newspapers Ltd. (Sri Lanka 31 Dec. 2010, 32; *Daily Mirror* 14 Feb. 2008). It describes itself as the "largest selling independent English daily in Sri Lanka," as having a circulation of 30,000 copies and a readership of approximately 150,000, and as providing an "independent editorial stand" and a "reliable and balanced presentation of the news" (ibid.). In 2010, RSF said that it was one of the few publications that "still dare[d] to criticise government policy" (9 Mar. 2010). In 2012, however, the *Toronto Star* described *Daily Mirror* as a pro-government newspaper (13 July 2012). According to the *Daily News*, the founder and Chairman of Wijaya Newspapers Ltd. is Ranjith Wijewardene (13 Feb. 2010). Wijaya Newspapers also owns the *Sunday Times* (Sri Lanka 31 Dec. 2010, 32).

2.2.3 Groundviews

Groundviews describes itself as a "citizen journalism website that uses a range of genres and media to highlight critical perspectives on governance, reconciliation, human rights, the arts and literature, democracy and other issues" (n.d.). It was established under the Voices of Reconciliation Project conducted by the Colombo-based Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) in 2005-2006 (*Groundviews* n.d.). It is located at the CPA and, since late 2010, its core funding has been provided by the Ford Foundation (ibid.). The CPA is an internationally funded independent and non-partisan organization that takes a "pro-active and interventionary" role in public policy, "aimed at the dissemination and advocacy of policy alternatives for non-violent conflict resolution and democratic governance" (CPA n.d.).

According to Natarajan,

[r]ecently there are more articles by academics and fewer posts by citizen journalists. It provides a platform for those supporting the government as well as those who are critical of it. By giving space to both sides, Groundviews is playing a very important mediatory role in post war Sri Lanka. (2012, 36)

Freedom House writes that "outlets such as Groundviews ... [are] providing news and a range of commentary, even on sensitive stories and events that are barely covered by the mainstream media" (2012).

2.2.4 The Island

The *Island* is based in Colombo and owned by Upali Newspapers Ltd. (Sri Lanka 31 Dec. 2010, 29-30). Additional information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.2.5 The Nation

The *Nation*, a weekly newspaper, is based in Colombo and owned by Rivira Media Corporation (PVT) Ltd. (ibid., 24-25). Additional information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.2.6 Sri Lanka Mirror

Sources indicate that the news website *Sri Lanka Mirror* is affiliated with the opposition United National Party (UNP) (IFJ [2012]; *The Island* 7 July 2012; *Ceylon Today* 11 July 2012). The *Island* reports that, according to Ruwan Fernandez, the head of another UNP-owned news site (*The Island* 7 July 2012; RSF 29 June 2012) who has also worked at *Sri Lanka Mirror* (IFJ [2012]; RSF 29 June 2012), *Sri Lanka Mirror* belongs to the media division of the UNP (*The Island* 7 July 2012). Sources describe Fernandez variously as a protégé (ibid.), a private secretary (*Ceylon Today* 11 July 2012), and a close political associate (IFJ [2012]) of Mangala Samaraweera, a UNP politician (ibid.; *Ceylon Today* 11 July 2012).

Sri Lanka Mirror was one of several news websites blocked by the government in November 2011 (RSF 28 Feb. 2012; AP 7 Nov. 2011), reportedly for insulting political leaders (ibid.). In June 2012, the Colombo police raided its office (Human Rights Watch 29 Oct. 2012; RSF 4 July 2012; IFJ [2012]), confiscating the office equipment and taking the staff into custody (ibid.; RSF 29 June 2012). RSF reports that, according to the police, the eight journalists were arrested for publishing "false news" that could be used to "defame the president and incite unrest," but were released by a judge the next day (ibid. 4 July 2012).

2.2.7 The Sunday Leader

Based in Ratmalana, the *Sunday Leader* is owned by Leader Publications (PVT) Ltd. (Sri Lanka 31 Dec. 2010, 17). It describes itself as "privately owned and published by Leader Publications, which is known for its outspoken news coverage" (*The Sunday Leader* n.d.). According to the *Toronto Star*, it is the country's third-largest weekly paper, with a circulation of 48,000 (13 July 2012). The *Toronto Star* also writes that the newspaper has "made a name for itself with hard-edged investigative reporting" (13 July 2012). Similarly, the BBC states that the *Sunday Leader* is "known for doggedly pursuing stories alleging government misdeeds" (21 Sept. 2012). RSF also wrote in 2010 that the paper is one of few publications that "still dare to criticise government policy" (9 Mar. 2010).

Sources report that a former editor of the paper was threatened and insulted by Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the brother of the president, while conducting a telephone interview with the Defence Secretary in July 2012 (*Toronto Star* 13 July 2012; RSF 12 July 2012). That editor reportedly resigned in September 2012, after the new owner of the newspaper asked her to stop publishing articles critical of President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his family (Human Rights Watch 29 Oct. 2012; BBC 21 Sept. 2012). The BBC reports that the new owner is an associate of the Rajapaksa family, several members of which are senior government officials, and that he bought a 72 percent stake in the paper (ibid.). The IFJ says the new owner, who it describes as holding a "substantial stake" in the publication, is Asanga Seneviratne, a stock market investor ([2012]). The Toronto-based International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), which is composed of 90 independent organizations around the world and which works to expose violations of free expression worldwide (n.d.), states that he is an "ally" of the President (19 Oct. 2012). In October 2012, the newspaper reportedly apologized to the Defence Minister for having reported on his threats towards the former editor (IFEX 19 Oct. 2012).

2.2.8 TamilNet

On its website, TamilNet describes itself as "an independent and not-for-profit newswire service that provides up to date news with Tamil perspective on issues concerning Tamil people in the island of Sri Lanka" (9 Oct. 2005). It indicates that it does not have a central office and that the "founder and colleagues in different parts of the world" do not "claim individual ownership" (TamilNet n.d.). It is funded by private donations and sponsorships, although it received project funding from "a European country" in 1998 and 1999 (ibid.).

TamilNet is often described as a pro-Tamil Tiger website (BBC 23 Oct. 2012; Natarajan 2012, 35). A document published by the Ministry of Defence of Sri Lanka identifies TamilNet as part of the "LTTE/Pro LTTE Media Network" (July 2011, 26). However, TamilNet states that it has never been funded or controlled by the LTTE (n.d.). According to Natarajan, the site advocates for a separate Tamil state and "continues to justify the armed struggle" (2012, 35). Natarajan adds that, since the end of the civil war, TamilNet has also published stories "highlighting the difficulties faced by Tamils" (2012, 35). The website states that it is subject to an "unofficial ban" within Sri Lanka (TamilNet n.d.). RSF indicated in March 2011 that the site was still blocked in the country (11 Mar. 2011) and that its service provider was subject to "Distributed Denial-of-Service Attacks (DDoS)" to disrupt its web traffic (28 Feb. 2012).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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