



## Fact Sheet

### Report: Increased Attacks on Journalists in Sri Lanka & Continuing Impunity

On February 9, 2021 the Center for Justice and Accountability [released a report](#) on the current crisis of impunity for violence against journalists in Sri Lanka, with input from the Committee to Protect Journalists. A decade ago, the Sri Lankan government under President Mahinda Rajapaksa undertook a systematic and deadly campaign to silence journalists and repress freedom of expression. In 2014, Sri Lanka ranked among the top ten countries on [CPJ's impunity index](#) for the killing of journalists. Today, impunity for those attacks has given rise to a new wave of repression under the new administration of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Human rights and freedom of expression are again rapidly deteriorating: individuals investigating attacks on journalists in Sri Lanka have been [arrested](#) or [forced to flee the country](#), and journalists are again forced to choose between [exile and self-censorship](#). The Human Rights Council, [set to convene this month](#), has the opportunity to vote on a new resolution to promote accountability and take action to ensure greater protection of journalists in Sri Lanka.

#### Ongoing Impunity in Sri Lanka for State Sponsored Violence Against Journalists

- From 2005 to 2015, Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration launched an assault on the free press, targeting journalists critical of the government and its security forces. The Ministry of Defense, led by then-Secretary of Defense Gotabaya Rajapaksa, implemented this campaign through its "white van commandos," a team of special operatives that used white vans to [kidnap and murder journalists](#), and the "Tripoli Platoon," a clandestine unit within the Military Intelligence Division that surveilled and attacked journalists. At least [four attacks on journalists are linked to the Tripoli Platoon](#): including the murder of [Lasantha Wickrematunge](#), the abduction and torture of [Keith Noyahr](#), the assault against [Upali Tennakoon](#), and the disappearance of [Prageeth Eknaligoda](#).
- Despite over a decade of [promises](#) by the Government, none of these high profile attacks have resulted in accountability, and efforts to shed light on the abuses have resulted in political interference, witness intimidation, and further retaliation.
- Following years of impunity, the perpetrators are back in power: the former leader of the Tripoli Platoon has been [promoted](#) and other officials implicated in war crimes have been reinstated to positions of command, including [Lieutenant-General Shavendra Silva](#). Silva, was sanctioned by the U.S. for "[gross violations of human rights](#)," and Gotabaya Rajapaksa – the former Secretary of Defense [implicated in Lasantha's assassination](#) – was elected president in 2019.

#### Increased Attacks on Journalists since President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's November 2019 Election

- Under a renewed Rajapaksa government, attacks on journalists have increased dramatically. Journalists have been [interrogated](#), [beaten](#), [subject to unlawful searches and seizures and forced to flee the country](#). Witnesses have been [intimidated](#), police officers advancing investigations of journalist attacks have been [arrested](#), and [state surveillance of journalists has increased](#).

**Recommendations to Member States of the Human Rights Council:**

- Given the Government of Sri Lanka’s refusal to take concrete steps to implement its human rights obligations, including its duty to ensure that victims of state violence have a right to a remedy, we urge the Human Rights Council to implement the [recommendations made by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), including passing a new resolution that establishes a dedicated mechanism to collect and preserve evidence to support future accountability processes, provides enhanced monitoring of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, and prioritizes support to civil society initiatives, particularly initiatives assisting victims and their families.
- We also ask the Human Rights Council to recommend that the Government of Sri Lanka take affirmative steps to prevent violence against journalists, including:
  - To immediately cease harassment, surveillance, and attacks on journalists and current and former law enforcement officials investigating crimes against journalists
  - To promptly release former CID Director Shani Abeysekera, who had been overseeing an investigation into violence against journalists prior to his detention
  - To repeal legislation criminalizing criticism of the government
  - To resume and provide resources for the stalled investigations into the death of attacks of journalists such as Lasantha Wickrematunge and Prageeth Eknaligoda.

For more information on CJA’s work on behalf of the family of Lasantha Wickrematunge, visit:

<https://cja.org/what-we-do/litigation/wickrematunge-v-rajapaksa/>

Or contact: Nushin Sarkarati, [nsarkarati@cja.org](mailto:nsarkarati@cja.org)

For more information on CPJ’s work on documenting attacks on journalists in Sri Lanka, visit:

<https://cpj.org/asia/sri-lanka/>

Or contact: Aliya Iftikhar, [aiftikhar@cpj.org](mailto:aiftikhar@cpj.org)