Reporters Without Borders

Asia - Sri Lanka

Censorship

Sectarian violence in south declared off-limits for media

17 June 2014

The Sri Lankan authorities asked the local media not to cover the clashes between Buddhists and Moslems that erupted in the southern region of Aluthgama on the night of 15 June. A curfew was also imposed in an attempt to contain a situation described by the government as "tense."

Although the media have been asked not to report the truth about these and other events of late, coverage of the clashes in Aluthgama has been posted on websites that are blocked in Sri Lanka but are accessible outside the country.

Journalists were harassed and attacked and their equipment was smashed when they went to cover the clashes, in which dozens of people were injured and several were killed.

Those attacked included *Sunday Leader* reporter **Binoy Suriarachi**, who was held hostage of several hours. His release was negotiated by **Megara Tegal** and **Dileesha Abeysundara**, two journalists who had gone with him to cover the clashes.

"*Censorship of the media's news coverage by the authorities is outrageous but customary in Sri Lanka whenever problems with minorities arise,*" said Benjamin Ismaïl, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific desk. "*However, banning coverage of events will not prevent the information from getting out.*"

The clashes erupted after a gathering by Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force), a radical Buddhist group that is waging a campaign against the Moslem community. Participants attacked mosques and prayer houses.

The long tradition of government censorship includes banning and blocking the websites of many newspapers. On 12 May, the *Sri Lanka Mirror*'s website joined the long list of blocked sites, which already includes the *Tamilnet*, *Lankanews*, *Lanka news web* and the *Colombo Telegraph* sites.

Sri Lanka is ranked 165th out of 180 countries in the 2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.