

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/sri-lanka-rwb-and-jds-address-open-letter-to-27-08-2013,45104.html>

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Asia - Sri Lanka

Call to UNHCHR

RWB and JDS address open letter to Navi Pillay

27 August 2013

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## **Joint appeal from Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and its partner organization, Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) to United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navanethem (Navi) Pillay.**

08.27.2013

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and its partner organization, Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) calls upon the head of United Nations human rights body visiting Sri Lanka to be uncompromising in her search for accountability on grave crimes committed against journalists and media freedom. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem (Navi) Pillay commenced her weeklong visit on the 25th of August to a country which is on the Reporters Without Borders lists of "countries under surveillance" and ranked 162nd out of 179 countries in the 2013 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.

The top UN human rights official's visit comes in the wake of a violent attack on the president of the newly formed Sri Lanka Journalists' Trade Union (SLJTU). In the early hours of Saturday (24) a group of five men armed with knives and hand grenades stormed the residence of SLJTU president **Mandana Ismail Abeywickrama**, the Associate Editor of *'The Sunday Leader'*. While one of the assailants was killed during shootout with the police, four are in custody due to timely action by her journalist husband. Media watchdogs are highly suspicious as the army spokesman was compelled to officially admit that at least two of the attackers were soldiers attached to Sri Lankan Army. But the police ranking the crime against a media activist as a mere burglary, even before any conclusive investigation was carried out, highlights the perilous environment journalists, media activists and the free media encounter in Sri Lanka.

Media workers have been killed, abducted, made to disappear and forced to flee the country while media institutions have been bombed and burnt. Sri Lanka's only provincially produced newspaper, Jaffna based *'Uthayan'* alone, has come under brutal attacks over 37 times and at least five of its journalists have been killed since 2002. While all these crimes were committed in an extremely militarised area, no one so far has been brought to book.

Reporters Without Borders and Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka expect the High Commissioner to be firm in securing a transparent commitment from the Sri Lankan government to bring justice to those who have been victims of grave crimes against media freedom. "As long as crimes against the media and its workforce go unpunished, while perpetrators feel safe with the implicit assurance of impunity, media freedom in Sri Lanka is facing a grave threat. We urge Navi Pillay to remind Sri Lanka's leaders of their accountability in delivering justice," said the two organisations.

Navi Pillay's Sri Lanka visit comes ahead of the UN Human Rights Council regular session in September where she is due to make an oral statement on Sri Lanka. In March last year the

UNHRC adopted a resolution upon calling an independent and credible investigation into alleged war crimes. The country's human rights record came under international scrutiny following the allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during government's war against the Tamil rebels.

"The apparent unwillingness of the Sri Lankan authorities to address threats to media freedom has to be seen as an extension of the same repressive policy adopted during the war. The high handed manner that the Sri Lankan government handled rights activists and organisations during the war is still being continued to restrict the public from having access to independent information and opinion. We urge the High Commissioner to evaluate media freedom in the environment of the government's overall human rights record challenged by many entities including the UN," said the two organisations.

*Photo : Ishara S.KODIKARA / AFP*

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