

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/sri-lanka-interview-with-editor-who-was-12-07-2012,43016.html>

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Asia - Sri Lanka

Aggressive government

## Interview with editor who was threatened by defence secretary

12 July 2012

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Reporters Without Borders condemns the threats and insults that defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the president's brother, made against *Sunday Leader* editor **Frederica Jansz** during a phone interview on 9 July.

"We call on defence secretary Rajapaksa to stop threatening journalists who are doing their job," Reporters Without Borders said. "In many countries, a government official would have to resign for making such comments and would probably be subject to a criminal prosecution. The justice system cannot turn a blind eye when a secretary openly makes such grave threats.

"As our interview with Jansz (below) indicates, recent developments and statements by President Mahinda Rajapaksa and other officials show Sri Lanka moving steadily away from the rule of law and its leaders becoming more and more intolerant towards the media. We urge the international community to firmly condemn these verbal attacks on journalists and to put pressure on the government to ensure that they do not go unpunished. Otherwise, self-censorship will continue to increase and journalists who do not toe the line will continue to be exposed to physical reprisals."

During the 9 July phone interview, the defence secretary reportedly called Jansz a "pig" and said "people will kill you." He then denied threatenig her.

GR: People will kill you!!! People hate you!!! They will kill you!!! FJ: On your directive? GR: What?? No. Not mine. But they will kill you – you dirty f....g shit journalist.

Jansz has been [threatened](#) several times in the past, above all in November 2009, when she gave Reporters Without Borders an [interview](#) about the media self-censorship that is widespread in Sri Lanka. Her predecessor as *Sunday Leader* editor, **Lasantha Wickrematunga**, was gunned down in Colombo on 8 January 2009. Those responsible for his murder have never been brought to justice.

This is not the first time that the defence secretary has [targeted journalists](#) and openly expressed his hostility to media freedom. He and his brothers, including the president, are on the Reporters Without Borders list of "[predators of press freedom](#)."

Following the latest phone threats, Jansz gave Reporters Without Borders an interview about harassment of the media by the Rajapaksa family-led government. Her replies reflect the deterioration in the media environment since the interview she gave in 2009.

**Reporters Without Borders:** *Why do you think Gotabaya Rajapaksa allows himself to threaten you so openly on the phone ?*

**Frederica Jansz:** Gotabaya Rajapaksa is the second most powerful man in Sri Lanka, next to his brother, the President. He enjoys complete immunity, coupled with the trappings of power inherent to the highest office in this land – that of the president. This is not the first time Rajapaksa has threatened journalists. In fact he has succeeded in cowing Sri Lanka's journalists into submission. They are terrified of this man and will not dare challenge his abuse of power.

*Is there really no accountability for government officials ?*

Not where Gotabaya Rajapaksa is concerned. No.

*Are the threats to be taken seriously ? And if so, why ?*

Yes. It is well within his power to do me harm, whether or not through abuse of the state machinery that lies at his disposal.

*Does this mean that the Rajapaksa family can do whatever they want and are subject to no restraints, either within Sri Lanka or from the international community ?*

This is Sri Lanka. My predecessor, **Lasantha Wickrematunge**, was murdered in broad daylight on his way to work three and a half years ago. His killers continue to roam free. In January 2010, the cartoon journalist **Prageeth Eknaligoda** went missing. His whereabouts are still not known. The journalists **Poddala Jayantha** and **Keith Noyahr** were beaten and tortured to within an inch of their life. The perpetrators of these dastardly acts remain at large. White van abductions continue unabated. The abductors remain at large. So yes, to answer your question, the Rajapaksa family have proved over and over again that they can do whatever they want. There are no limits to what they can do.

*What is working as a journalist like nowadays in Sri Lanka in both the state-run and privately-owned media ?*

You 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.

*What can and should be done as a priority to improve the situation ?*

This country is now saddled with an apathetic opposition. Fear has taken a firm hold on civil society. And the media have been effectively cowed into submission. I honestly do not know what can be done in this situation. The fear of getting killed or abducted by a white van now runs too high for people to unite and stand together on issues such as this. And that includes the parliamentarians from the main opposition parties.

*What message would you like to send to the United Nations, the EU and international institutions in general ?*

Enough is enough. That is the line that they should be taking with this government.

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