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<http://www.rsf.org/sri-lanka-president-personally-phones-02-08-2011,40732.html>

Asia - Sri Lanka

Presidential threat

President personally phones newspaper's chairman to threaten him

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Reporters Without Borders firmly condemns the threats that President Mahinda Rajapaksa made in a phone call to the chairman of *The Sunday Leader*, **Lal Wickrematunge**, on 19 July because of an article reporting that China had given the president and his son, parliamentarian Namal Rajapaksa, money to be used "at their discretion."

"We are extremely shocked that the president personally phones journalists in order to threaten them," Reporters Without Borders said. "It is unacceptable that *The Sunday Leader*, Sri Lanka's only independent English-language newspaper, should be subjected to such pressure. If the president disagrees with an article, he can respond to it and explain himself in the media. That is how issues are discussed in a democracy.

"We condemn the president's action as irresponsible. A country's president is supposed to set an example. But Mahinda Rajapaksa is setting a bad one. It says a lot about the degree of respect he feels for media independence and his political readiness to establish the conditions needed for media freedom. We urge him to change course.

"This is not the first time that a news media has been threatened by members of the Rajapaksa family. We urge the president to put an immediate stop to these warnings and threats against journalists. We also urge Sri Lanka's media to join together in condemning such behaviour, which can have a real intimidatory effect on the entire media profession."

When Wickrematunge received the call from President Rajapaksa on 19 July, the president shouted: "*You are writing lies, outrageous lies! You can attack me politically, but if you attack me personally, I will know how to attack you personally too.*" Around 100 posters with the words "Do not lie!" and "*The gods will punish you*" also appeared on the walls of the newspaper's headquarters. (see picture)

Rajapaksa's call was prompted by an article that editor **Frederica Jansz** published in the newspaper two days earlier reporting that China had made a grant of 9 million dollars to the president and half a million dollars to the president's son, to be used "at their discretion." The newspaper's attempts to contact the president for an explanation had been unsuccessful.

The Sunday Leader has long been targeted by the government. Lal Wickrematunge's predecessor at the head of the newspaper, Lasantha Wickrematunge, was murdered on 8 January 2009. The murder was not investigated properly and the culprit was never caught, in a clear sign of ill-will on the part of the authorities. Reporters Without Borders reiterates its call for a proper investigation.

Lal Wickrematunge took charge of the newspaper after his brother's murder. Now he is the target of intimidation attempts too.
