

For immediate release – 6 March 2009

International Press Freedom Groups Call for Justice for Jailed Sri Lankan Journalist

One year after Tamil journalist J.S. Tissainayagam was detained without charge in Sri Lanka, international media rights organisations remain deeply worried about his continuing detention on charges of terrorism.

Marking the anniversary of his detention on March 7, 2008, the International Press Freedom Mission is calling for the unconditional release of Tissainayagam, who has been subjected to arbitrary court adjournments and is suffering ill health.

“The treatment of Tissainayagam and the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) against him have set an alarming precedent in efforts to silence independent voices and criticism in Sri Lanka, especially in regard to reporting on the conduct of the war in Sri Lanka,” the press freedom organisations said.

Tissainayagam, the editor of OutreachSL, and a respected columnist with the *Sunday Times*, was detained on March 7, 2008 by the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) of the Sri Lankan police force. He was detained as he sought to check on the welfare of his colleagues, Jasiharan and Vallamathy, who were taken into custody the previous day.

Tissainayagam was held without charge for more than five months. Successive courts extended his detention with no explanation. During this time he was granted only sporadic access to family, legal advice and medical attention for a degenerative illness.

Court hearings were regularly postponed. Tissainayagam’s lawyers lodged a fundamental rights petition to seek interim relief, on the grounds of arbitrary arrest, torture, ethnic discrimination and a denial of equality of protection under law. It was denied.

On August 25, indictments were issued against Tissainayagam, Jasiharan and Vallarmathy in the High Court of Colombo.

The charges were laid under the PTA, a draconian law that has remained on Sri Lanka’s statute books despite being introduced in 1979 as an ostensibly temporary measure. The Government has repeatedly rejected calls for bail.

The charges are:

1. The accused together with unknown persons conspired to commit an offence by intending to cause the commission of acts of violence through inciting communal disharmony by words either spoken or intended to be read or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, through the printing or distribution of the publication North Eastern Monthly magazine.
2. An offence by the accused himself has been committed by intending to cause the commission of acts of violence through inciting racial or communal disharmony by words either spoken or intended to be read or by signs or by

visible representations or otherwise, through the printing or distribution of the publication North Eastern Monthly Magazine.

3. The third charge under the Emergency Regulations of 2006 relates to acting in furtherance of specified terrorist activities, (“specified terrorist activities” being defined as offences under the PTA) by contributing or collecting or obtaining information relating to the purpose of terrorism through the collection of funds for the North Eastern Monthly magazine.

The charges against Tissainayagam refer to two articles he wrote in 2006 for the *North-Eastern Monthly*, in which he criticises the Government’s military campaign and its impact on civilians.

Tissainayagam is the first Sri Lankan journalist formally charged under the PTA and one of less than a handful of journalists facing counter-terrorism charges in any country with a democratically elected government.

On November 17, Tissainayagam was suddenly moved from a remand prison to the notorious Magazine Prison in Colombo, which is known for violence against Tamil prisoners. Reports at the time said he showed signs of being physically tortured.

The International Mission says that: “Tissainayagam’s health and access to necessary medical treatment remain a major concern having contracted both tuberculosis and acute infected scabies over the last number of months”.

The international Mission remains committed to the release of both Tissainayagam, as well as his colleagues Jasiaran and Vallamarthy, and appeals to authorities in Sri Lanka to abide by internationally recognised standards to ensure their unconditional release.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- Since 2006, the International Press Freedom Mission to Sri Lanka has conducted three missions to Sri Lanka.
- The mission includes and is supported by the following international organizations: Amnesty International, ARTICLE 19, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), FreeVoice, International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), International Media Support (IMS), International Press Institute (IPI), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), World Association of Newspapers (WAN).