



Monday 16 June 2008

Mr Stephen Smith, MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I write on behalf of Civil Liberties Australia to express grave concern regarding the treatment of journalists in many parts of the world, but particularly in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Australia has made significant contributions to both those countries, and therefore has a right as well as the responsibility to speak out.

Sri Lanka:

We ask you to immediately protest formally to the Sri Lankan Government, and at the same time to create a coalition of like-minded countries to bring ongoing pressure to bear on the SL Government and its officials, in relation to the treatment of journalists and the media.

We ask you, on behalf of Australia, to require that the SL Government reverses its stance against journalists, at the risk of losing further Australian aid and support if it is unwilling to do so. Governments – including both the Sri Lankan Government and the Australian Government – have a universally-declared international responsibility to protect media freedoms: the SL Government is acting entirely irresponsibly in the opposite direction, despite the country's constitution guaranteeing such freedoms.

In Sri Lanka, both Ministers and senior officials associated with State institutions continue to issue extreme threats against newspaper, electronic and independent journalists in the country. Reliable reports indicate that even the chairman of the State-run Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation, Hudson Samarasinghe, has this month publicly threatened and sought to incite violence against journalists' leader Poddala Jayantha, as well as BBC journalist Elmo Fernando, in a radio broadcast on 8 June. Jayantha is the general secretary of the Sri Lankan Working Journalists' Association (SLWJA), the largest journalists' organisation in the country and an affiliate of the International Federation of Journalists, whose Asia-Pacific headquarters is in Australia.

These attacks on journalists in SL follow previous verbal and physical assaults by SL Ministers, officials, police and security services over the past year. If Australia remains silent, the silence is tacit support at least; continuing silence would become perceived complicity. We look forward to reading publicly of your protest, and to receiving advice about the protest and your ongoing leadership actions by letter from you at your earliest convenience.

Afghanistan:

In Afghanistan, the 23-year-old journalist Sayad Parwez Kambaksh remains on death row, having been found guilty of 'discussing women's role in society'. CLA does not believe Australian troops should be fighting to support a country where someone can hang – or even be jailed – for discussing women's role in society in the context of university debate and learning.

We ask that you formally protest the situation in relation to Mr Kambaksh to the Afghan Government, and that you make your protest on behalf of Australia publicly known.

We should expect that Australia's views, given our troop and funding contributions, will be listened to attentively in Kabul; we therefore have the right and responsibility to speak out to shape a positive academic and media future for a country where we are fighting to save 'democracy' and a 'democratically-elected government'. There would be no value in Australia's efforts if the type of 'democracy' we fight for permits a student to be hanged, or jailed, for what would not be an offence in other 'democratic' countries in the world.

You will recall that we originally wrote to you about Mr Kambaksh, and asked you to protest the situation, in January 2008. We are not aware of any protest or diplomatic action by Australia: should we be wrong, we would be grateful for a response to both our 25 January letter, and this one, pointing out what has been done.

Could you please also advise me by letter of the outcome from these representations to the Sri Lankan and Afghanistan Governments? Thank you.

Yours sincerely

Bill Rowlings
CEO