

## **Statement by Sonali Samarasinghe Wickrematunge**

“Your Highnesses, Mr Director-General, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of my late husband and fellow journalist, Lasantha Wickrematunge, I wish to thank you most sincerely for this great honour you have done him. Lasantha would have been so proud, so humbled, to have known that an august, independent, international jury of his peers had seen in him, a fit candidate to receive this prize. On his behalf, and on behalf of fellow journalists worldwide who continue to risk life and liberty, to provide for us, all the freedoms we so cherish, from the bottom of my heart I thank you. His parents and his children will be so proud, to know of the recognition you have given their son, their father... as indeed am I, now his widow.

The fact that Lasantha is the second journalist to be honoured posthumously since this prize was created 12 years ago is testimony to the risk many journalists run in the pursuit of their calling. Two years ago you honoured Anna Politkovskaya, an unapologetic critic of military and political excess, who was brutally murdered in Moscow in October 2006.

The life trajectories of Anna and Lasantha bear bizarre similarities. They were both born in 1958. They were both courageous critics of state-sponsored violence and spoke fearlessly for human rights. They were both threatened with death over a period of years. They both suffered repeated attempts on their lives. And they both chose not to flee, but to stay on and fight to the end. They both knew full well that they would pay with their lives. And they both knew who their murderers would be.

But the fate that befell Anna and Lasantha is not an isolated one. In Sri Lanka, it has become the norm for journalists to be killed in the pursuit of their profession. No less than 16 dissident media professionals have been assassinated—all of them in commando-style attacks—since President Mahinda Rajapakse took office in November 2005. That is about one in every two months. Presses and television stations have been destroyed in these raids, as indeed have the newspapers Lasantha and I edited.

Apart from those who have lost their lives, we need to remember also those journalists who languish in Sri Lankan prisons with no charge or with only the flimsiest and most childish of contrived charges pressed against them. In other cases, false charges are levelled so as to harass dissenting journalists.

Dozens of journalists—including myself—have been forced to flee Sri Lanka. I have no doubt that should I return to Sri Lanka, my remaining days would be few indeed.

Other journalists have been threatened personally by the president or his brothers, three of whom he has elevated to high public office. Indeed, on 11 January 2006 Lasantha too, was personally threatened by President Rajapaksa.

The free Sri Lanka in which I was born no longer exists. Our country has entered a Dark Age characterized by tyranny and state-sponsored terror, where the government publicly, cynically and unapologetically equates democratic dissent to treason. The sinister white van in which the

state abducts its perceived enemies including journalists, many of them never to be seen again, has become a symbol of untold dread. Yet, we need to remember that violence against journalists is only the tip of the iceberg. Tens of thousands of ordinary Sri Lankan civilians—men, women, children, and the aged—have been herded into concentration camps where they are held against their will. There they languish in the most horrible of conditions, trapped behind barbed-wire fences and beneath the radar of a world which, perhaps rightly, is more concerned with the arguably greater tragedies unfolding in places such as Darfur. But what has been their crime? They belong to an ethnic minority living in an area infested by the Liberation Tigers, one of the most murderous terrorist organizations the world has ever seen. The Tamil civilians of Sri Lanka's north are caught in a vice-like grip between LTTE terrorism on the one side and state terrorism on the other. And I use that word advisedly, for the Sri Lankan government is perhaps the only one on this planet that persists in bombing its own civilian citizenry.

That this is a racist war is not a secret. I would not go so far as to use the word genocide, but it would not surprise me to see it used in future international legal action against the government. At any rate, the government itself has plastered the countryside with enormous placards lauding the military with the slogan, in Sinhala, the language of the Sinhalese majority to which I too, belong, stating: "Soldiers, our race salutes you!" Not "the people", not "the country", but the *race*. And all these placards exhibit the stated provenance of the Ministry of Defence or other government institutions. Interestingly, none of these hoardings are in Tamil, the language of the people the government claims it is seeking to liberate.

I make this point because it is urgent and important that the world realizes what is happening in Sri Lanka before it is too late.

Sadly, even those who should see best are blind to the plight of the innocents caught in the crossfire as state terrorism seeks to counter the LTTE's terrorism. It frustrates me that even people who should know better do not seem to. A few days after Lasantha's murder an international Journal opined that "For all those who argue that there's no military solution for terrorism, we have two words: Sri Lanka." It is a pity that even journalists often fail to see the distinction between terror perpetrated by terrorists and terror perpetrated by governments. This Journal might just as well have said to all those who argue that there's no military solution for terrorism, they have just one word: terrorism. For *that* is the solution the government of Sri Lanka has chosen: terrorism against civilians, terrorism against journalists, terrorism against dissidents of all kinds.

It angers me, as it did Lasantha, that we have learned so little from history. I beseech you and anyone who will listen not to allow Sri Lanka's government, under the cover of a war against terror, to engage in acts of terror or crimes against humanity. Soon it will be too late, and history will not forgive us if we do not act now.

What then, of Lasantha's murder? Within hours of his assassination, President Rajapakse promised a full inquiry and promised to bring the perpetrators to justice. Of course, no such thing has happened. Almost four months have passed, and all we have seen is a cover-up. There has been no meaningful investigation, no trace of the vehicles used in the assassination, no call for

information on the murder weapon, and even the cause of death has been deliberately smudged so as to derail a future investigation.

But by recognizing his life and work as you have done today, you send an important message to tyrants everywhere, that killing the messenger is not a solution. If by nothing else, it is by gestures such as the one you have made here today that the point is made ever more strongly that the human spirit cannot be subdued by violence—no, not even by murder. And so it is that even in death Lasantha's name draws more hits on Google than the prime minister of Sri Lanka.

Your Highnesses, Mr. Director General, Ladies and Gentlemen: thank you for your patience and, from the bottom of my heart, on behalf of Lasantha and the community of journalists who fight on to make ours a nobler, more just and humane world, I thank you most sincerely. I want you to know that you have earned the gratitude not just of myself and all those who loved and admired Lasantha, but also of those to whom his life and his example will serve as a beacon in the future.

To the readers of the newspaper he edited he left a final message. And I would like to leave you with my husbands' last words.

“We have espoused unpopular causes, stood up for those too feeble to stand up for themselves”, he wrote. “We have made sure that whatever the propaganda of the day, you were allowed to hear a contrary view. For this I—and my family—have now paid the price that I have long known I will one day have to pay. I am—and have always been—ready for that. I have done nothing to prevent this outcome: no security, no precautions. I want my murderer to know that I am not a coward like he is, hiding behind human shields while condemning thousands of innocents to death. What am I among so many? It has long been written that my life would be taken, and by whom. All that remains to be written is when.”

Thank you.”

Sonali Samarasinghe Wickrematunge