

January 4, 2010

President Mahinda Rajapakse
Temple Trees
Colombo 1
Sri Lanka

My Dear President,

Inquiry into the murder of Lasantha Wickrematunge

On 8 January 2010, it will be one year since my husband and your ‘friend’, Lasantha Wickrematunge, was assassinated in broad daylight while driving to work. He was one of 14 dissident journalists to have been murdered in Sri Lanka after you became President in 2005. In not a single of these cases have the murderers been brought to book. Indeed, it was not for nothing that Lasantha himself observed that “murder has become the primary tool whereby the state seeks to control the organs of liberty.... When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me.” Not only was Lasantha’s murder not investigated, neither were any of the several preceding commando-style attacks on him, his home and The Sunday Leader’s press.

It is no secret that several other journalists have been attacked or otherwise threatened, resulting in their being forced to flee Sri Lanka. Yet others have been coerced into submission. At no time in the history of our country has the freedom of expression so brutally been repressed as it is now. Such media as do operate in the country have been transformed into propaganda mouthpieces for you and your brothers, or into flaccid shells of their former integrity, bullied into submission through the draconian ‘emergency regulations’ you have arbitrarily promulgated – superseding and, in effect, laying waste to the Constitution that has formed the bedrock of our Nation for the past thirty-two years. These regulations that you have so readily enacted have already resulted in one journalist being imprisoned for a term of 20 years.

In the 12 months that have elapsed since Lasantha’s murder, there has been virtually no investigation into this crime. Had there been even the slightest interest in initiating such an inquiry, the apprehension of his murderers would have been child’s play. According to witnesses the assassins all rode a uniform make and type of motorcycle, yet there was no call for information from the public in this regard. After all, two or more men riding a similar make of motorcycle would not likely escape the attention of the neighbours.

What is more, based on witness accounts, Lasantha’s assailants appear to have communicated between themselves using cellular telephones over a period of several hours and across a number of

contiguous cells. Although this makes it quite easy to track their movements, and ascertain their identity, the police have made no visible attempt to do so. Laughably, the official inquiry seems to have centred almost entirely around Lasantha's own telephone, evidently in an endeavour to identify his sources rather than his executioners.

Finally, despite the existence of numerous witnesses, no accurate description of the attack was ever made public by the police. Mysteriously, though the cause of death was recorded as "due to gunshot injuries", neither were spent cartridges found at the scene; nor a single bullet recovered from Lasantha's body or shown on an x-ray. Taken together, all this can leave little doubt in a rational mind that the murder has been the focus of an extensive—if clumsy—cover up.

In the wake of Lasantha's assassination you not only publicly proclaimed that he was your friend and that you met with him frequently, but you also promised a swift and thorough inquiry. That was indeed generous of you, especially in view of the fact that Lasantha was unarguably among the biggest thorns in your side, right from the time he exposed the 'Helping Hambantota' scandal, in which money donated to the people of Sri Lanka for tsunami relief mysteriously found its way into a private bank account controlled by you. But that, involving as it did, a mere few hundred thousand dollars, has in these past four years of your presidency paled into insignificance. Despite your sanctimonious promise; now, twelve months after Lasantha's murder, we all know that no inquiry ever materialized. It is perhaps most indicative of your government's attitude towards such matters that when your brother Gotabhaya, who oversees the police, was asked about the inquiry by a foreign journalist, he giggled like a petulant child with a secret, asking (on camera, and for the record of posterity), "Who is Lasantha?"

Lasantha himself knew full well that he would be murdered, and who his murderer would be. He was not afraid of death. He needed no escorts, bullet proof vests or armoured cars to ply his trade. He lived by his publicly stated motto: unbowed and unafraid. Indeed, with remarkable prescience, he addressed personally to you an *obiter dictum*:

"In the wake of my death I know you will make all the usual sanctimonious noises and call upon the police to hold a swift and thorough inquiry. But like all the inquiries you have ordered in the past, nothing will come of this one, too. For truth be told, we both know who will be behind my death, but dare not call his name. Not just my life, but yours too, depends on it... You will never be allowed to forget that my death took place under your watch. As anguished as I know you will be, I also know that you will have no choice but to protect my killers: you will see to it that the guilty one is never convicted. You have no choice. I feel sorry for you, and Shiranthi will have a long time to spend on her knees when next she goes for Confession for it is not just her own sins which she must confess, but those of her extended family that keeps you in office."

Lasantha's life has been celebrated widely throughout the world. He has posthumously been awarded numerous honours, including UNESCO's World Press Freedom Prize and five other major international awards. His work has inspired the world. Even today, a large artistic monument to Lasantha titled Unbowed and Unafraid by Austrian architect and sculptor Peter Sandbichler, stands prominently outside Vienna's renowned Museum of Modern Art.



While these are unique and prestigious honours that would distinguish any person, let alone a mere journalist from so small a country as ours, the Sri Lankan state media, now absolutely controlled by you, have failed to even mention them. It seems they have drawn their own conclusions as to who it was that slew Lasantha.

Even as the so-called investigation fell apart, I wrote you a letter on April 24, 2009 calling for an independent international inquiry into my husband's death. I also wrote to then-Inspector General of Police Jayantha Wickremaratne requesting his cooperation. Nearly one year later no progress has been made. Now with the upcoming presidential election at stake, predictably, Lasantha's murder has been made a speaking point of every election campaign. Do not reduce the investigation of my husband's murder into a political circus, Mr. President.

I want you to know that even at this very late stage I would welcome an impartial, transparent and professional inquiry that will identify Lasantha's murderers and bring them to justice. In the absence of a proper investigation to-date, and given 12 months of stonewalling by your government, both the Sri Lankan public and the world would have arrived at their own conclusions as to who it was that killed Lasantha. All you can do now is prove them wrong. And this I challenge you to do, Mr. President: *Prove them wrong.*

With Best wishes for the New Year,

Yours Faithfully,



Sonali Samarasinghe Wickrematunge

