

Article 19 broadens its focus on Asia

In 1997, Article 19 (a London-based NGO that advocates freedom of expression) plans to broaden the scope of its program on Asia by addressing key freedom of expression issues in countries such as Cambodia and China, and devoting increased attention to new developments such as the rapid spread of satellite broadcasting and new technology and their impact for furthering of expression.

It will continue to focus on countries manifesting the extremes of censorship—Burma, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka—and on Hong Kong, where current respect for freedom of expression is threatened by the territory's reversion to Chinese sovereignty on July 1.

Burma remains one of the most repressive and heavily censored countries. The junta systematically manipulates the state-controlled media to misinform and to threaten its opponents, including Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the country's ethnic minorities.

Indonesia, too, has been deeply affected by censorship, leading to growing public discontent. Newspapers have been banned and journalists jailed under repressive laws inherited from the colonial era, and the works of the country's leading writer remain proscribed. Self-censorship is endemic, reinforced by recurrent government denunciations of those who openly dissent as being subversives and unpatriotic.

In Sri Lanka, despite the government's promise to bring much-needed reform, steps to improve media freedom stalled when peace

talks between the government and Tamil separatists broke down and armed conflict resumed. The government has since imposed far-reaching restrictions to curb reporting of the war and its human consequences, and has embarked on a series of court actions against individual editors and journalists which may be intended to threaten the press as a whole.

Last January, Article 19 wrote to Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, protesting charges under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) brought against Ishini Wickremesinghe, a director of the independent television company TNL. The charges related to an alleged false report of an assault by rebel forces on a military camp in eastern Sri Lanka which was broadcast on December 28. Despite TNL's offer to broadcast a retraction and to allow the authorities air-time to clarify the facts, the government claimed that the broadcast could cause racial tension and endanger security, and instructed security forces to raid this station only and arrest the director.

Another attack, on New Year's Day, on an Independent Television News camera crew by a deputy minister's bodyguards, prompted Sri Lankan journalists, representing 27 organizations, to stage a peaceful demonstration in Colombo on January 15. The demonstrators carried placards accusing the government of using the draconian PTA to harass the media and calling for "a free media principle and a free media culture" in Sri Lanka.

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