

Voice of Shakthi Thursday 19 July 2001

Shakthi applauds the Sri Lankan Government's decision on Monday to lift the ban on direct reporting of news from the war zone. After many years of agitation for this basic tenet of democracy, it is heartening to note that good sense has prevailed at last. Hopefully, it will give Sri Lankan journalists the freedom at last to express the views they have suppressed for so long.

Sri Lankan journalists have been killed upto date while reporting on the political situation in Sri Lanka, the most notable among them Richard de Soysa and Nimalarajan. Many have had to flee the country to escape the wrath of both Sinhalese and Tamil extremists. Many have been intimidated even on foreign shores by those who opposed their independent views. The ones who stayed behind have faced numerous assaults, the latest by the President's own security division over which, journalists are now demanding a Commission of Inquiry. Hopefully, the Government's decision will end such intimidation.

The move will also spell the end of petty bureaucrats who elevated themselves to positions as Keepers of the Truth. In the heydays of press censorship, these characters who had no knowledge of the tenets of journalism, thought nothing of running their red pencils over the most innocuous news articles, including sports items. Hopefully, they will slink back to the obscurity they emerged from.

It seems absurd that it has taken so long for the authorities to realize the ineffectiveness of trying to suppress what was evident to everyone, that the so-called great military victories exacted a terrible price, that the role of armed militants who hide under the guise of democratic Tamil forces were far from democratic at all and that while we recorded the numbers of incidents and casualties, that hundreds and thousands of others suffered from their aftermath.

One only hopes that what the Government has given with one hand is not taken away from another. This is not the first time a Government has lifted press sanctions. But at the slightest whiff of what they called negative reporting, the ban was imposed again.

War is a dirty business. Independent journalists will focus on issues which may not be palatable to many. The My Lai massacre in Vietnam, the killings at Shabra and Shattila camps in Palestine, the slow death of civilians in Iraq due to sanctions imposed by Western powers following the Kuwaiti invasion, these are not palatable for those in power.

However, just as much as free, independent journalists cause discomfort to Governments, they can be equally critical of the opposing side of a conflict whether such movements are called guerillas, terrorists or freedom fighters. The lifting of the press ban in Sri Lanka is a sign of

maturity on the part of the Government. One hopes that this maturity will prevail as independent news reports start coming in from the war zone of the actual situation there.