



at the BMICH in July 2005.

She turned to the then Inspector General of Police Chandra Fernando and asked "why don't you charge him under the Official Secrets Act." Only weeks earlier, I had exposed a move by the Sri Lanka Navy to procure a battleship, 'Sir Galahad' which was being discarded by the British government because it found it costly to maintain. The question I raised was how Sri Lanka could maintain such a large vessel on which British troops had gone to war in the Falklands (Malvinas). Ms. Kumaratunga's outburst came after a Navy officer, now holding a higher position, raised issue. It was his then boss who was spearheading the negotiations for the deal. When most politicians are in the opposition, the journalist is their loved darling. Once in power, they become their most loathed enemy. Of course there are exceptions if one is willing to do their bidding.

Once on a visit to then LTTE-held Wannu during the ceasefire in 2003, I asked my escort Daya Master whether I could meet Captain Ajith Kumara Boyagoda of the Navy and other military men who were being held prisoner. The next day, I was taken to a location off Puthukudiyiruppu. We arrived at a house with a high parapet wall. A covered van brought Captain Boyagoda and six Army soldiers. At one point during my conversation with them, I asked Daya Master whether he would kindly withdraw so I could talk to them privately. He agreed. A long conversation ensued. Besides an account that appeared in the Sunday Times (Situation Report), I had also asked the seven, one after another, what I could do to seek their release. They briefed me but wished those accounts not be published lest it endangered their position. I agreed.

After my report appeared, I met with the then Army Commander, General Lionel Balagalle and briefed him. I told him that the prospects for a release were very high. He had initiated action thereafter and they were free. The fact that I was instrumental in their release was publicly acknowledged in a speech Captain Boyagoda made at a ceremony. It was held by Deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala whose Ceylinco Group donated houses to the seven.

On another visit, this time with the Army to a battle zone in Paranthan,

guerrilla mortars began to rain. I was hurriedly taken to a bunker. When there was a lull and I walked out, the sight I saw was most disturbing. Wounded soldiers were being loaded in the trailers of tractors and rushed for medical attention. I wrote about this in the Sunday Times (Situation Report). As a result, Dr. Anula Wijesundera, a public-spirited doctor at the Sri Jayawardenapura Hospital was among those who initiated a campaign to raise funds. The Army unit at Paranthan received a brand new ambulance. Reference was made at the handover ceremony to my initiative.

These are just a few of the innumerable instances where reporting has led to benefits both for the country and the military. However, it was not always that the media was given access to battle zones prompting armchair critics to say copies are written in air conditioned rooms. To some, the minds are so conditioned; they only see traitors and terrorist acolytes. If one is to ask me whether I am happy being a journalist, my answer would be 'yes of course.' That is notwithstanding the threats and intimidation. Mind you, we are referring to a period when Sri Lanka was listed as one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists. The threats will not go away. Someone, somewhere will feel hurt all the time. The more powerful he or she is, the bigger the threat. All these raise an important question — what is journalism?

The best definition I have read is from Bill Kovach whom I have had the pleasure of meeting a few times. He is guru to some New York Times staffers. He defines it succinctly in his book together with Tom Rosenstiel titled 'Elements of Journalism'. They say "the primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing." To fulfil this task, among other matters, they note the journalist's first obligation is to the truth and the first loyalty is to citizens.

Meeting those ideals, in today's context in Sri Lanka, may be akin to swimming against the tide. Threats of white van abductions, intimidation, harassment and even killings stare in the face. Yet, for 47 long years I have remained a journalist notwithstanding the praises, threats, the abuse and name calling.



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