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Sri Lanka: End Persecution of Journalist Dharisha Bastians Targeted for Reports, Defense of Human Rights

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The Sri Lankan authorities should stop targeting, intimidating and harassing journalist and woman human rights defender Dharisha Bastians and her family. The Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Front Line Defenders condemn this assault on human rights and press freedom in Sri Lanka and call on the Sri Lanka Police to immediately stop the harassment and ensure Bastians' safety.

Bastians is being targeted by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) [in its investigation into what the Sri Lankan government maintains is a false claim of abduction by an employee of the Swiss Embassy. Swiss officials assert that the incident took place.](#) Since December 2019 the CID has tried to link Bastians and several others to an inquiry into the alleged false accusation by the Swiss employee, seemingly attempting to prove some form of conspiracy. Pro-government media have conducted a campaign against Bastians and her family, supported by attacks on social media, labelling her a traitor and criminal.

Bastians is the former editor of the *Sunday Observer* newspaper, a state-owned English language weekly. She is also a contributor to the *New York Times*. Bastians has written extensively on human rights, militarization, corruption, religious freedom, democracy and political rights in Sri Lanka. Her writing has consistently highlighted the struggles of people targeted by successive governments, especially religious and ethnic minorities.

This is not the first time Bastians and her family have been targeted due to her work. She has written about the families of the forcibly disappeared in Sri Lanka and their struggle for truth and accountability. Most notably, Bastians covered the "Navy Abduction Case," in which the navy

allegedly abducted 11 young men for extortion in 2008. The case implicates high-ranking naval officers. In July 2018, [supporters of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa](#), including members of his family, denounced her and threatened legal action against her following an article she contributed to concerning Chinese investment in the Hambantota Harbour in southern Sri Lanka and payments made by Chinese companies to former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's campaign fund.

After twice attempting to seize her personal laptop computer without a warrant, CID officers entered Bastians' residence in Colombo on June 9 2020 with a warrant, searched the premises and her personal belongings, and seized the computer. Law enforcement officers have repeatedly targeted her colleagues, associates and family members in Sri Lanka.

In a [statement](#) on June 15 2020 on Twitter, Bastians said that in the course of the same investigation the CID obtained her call records "without a court order". These records were "scrutinized" and the information "subsequently exposed", which, she said, "could seriously endanger and compromise my sources and contacts, then, now and in the future." While offering to cooperate with investigation efforts, she stressed that she remains "gravely concerned about potential efforts by interested parties to compromise the integrity" of the seized electronic material and devices.

On 16 June, the Colombo Chief Magistrate ordered that a government analyst inspect the device to ascertain if any alterations had been made between June 4 and June 16, when the laptop was produced in court. The next court hearing on the matter is scheduled for July 21.

Bastians is being targeted due to her work as a professional journalist and human rights defender. The signatory organizations strongly condemn the Sri Lankan government's targeting, intimidation and harassment of Bastians. Sri Lankan authorities should immediately cease all attacks, intimidation, and harassment of Bastians, her associates, colleagues, and family in Sri Lanka and ensure their protection and safety.

Signed:

Signatory organizations:

Amnesty International

Committee to Protect Journalists

Front Line Defenders

Human Rights Watch

Reporters Without Borders

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