

**Charter for a Democratic and  
Pluralist Media Culture and Social  
and Professional Rights for  
Media and Journalism  
in Sri Lanka**

**As declared unanimously at the all-island conference of Sri Lankan journalists at  
Tholangamuwa, September 9-11, 2005**

THIS MEETING OF REPRESENTATIVES OF SRI LANKAN JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATIONS INCLUDING THE:

FEDERATION OF MEDIA EMPLOYEES TRADE UNIONS (FMETU),  
SRI LANKA WORKING JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION (SLWJA),  
SRI LANKA TAMIL MEDIA ALLIANCE (SLTMA), AND  
SRI LANKA MUSLIM MEDIA FORUM (SLMMF)];

WHICH WAS ORGANISED BY SRI LANKA'S CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE FREE MEDIA MOVEMENT (FMM) WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF CANADA'S INSTITUTE FOR MEDIA, POLICY AND CIVIL SOCIETY (IMPACS) THROUGH FUNDING FROM CIDA AND AUSAID, AND WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS (IFJ);

**DECLARES** ITS ENDORSEMENT OF THIS *CHARTER FOR A DEMOCRATIC AND PLURALIST MEDIA CULTURE AND SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL RIGHT FOR MEDIA AND JOURNALISM IN SRI LANKA*, AND **COMMITTS** ITS ASSOCIATIONS AND MEMBERS TO THE PRACTICAL PROGRAM OF FOLLOW-UP ACTION OUTLINED BELOW.

**Fair, balanced and independent media** is essential to good governance, effective public administration and the capacity of Sri Lankans to achieve a negotiated peace settlement and undertake a successful post-tsunami reconstruction program.

A professional media with a responsibility to the public interest, independent of government or partisan influence and interference, is a vital part of the series of checks and balances central to democracy.

The practice of journalism in Sri Lanka faces many challenges.

These challenges are of concern to Sri Lankan citizens but journalists, working together in professional solidarity, by building a culture of independent journalism, have a pivotal role to lead the campaign for media reform.

There needs to develop a strong and democratic public service culture within the news media so that it reflects the richness of society, serves the whole community independent of commercial, partisan or government interests and provides a plurality of voices from across the spectrum of society in Sri Lanka.

This charter sets out the minimum standards and principles that underpin the public's right to know and a free media in a democratic society and outlines a practical program of action to support media reform.

## **1. Fundamental Principles**

- 1.1 Respect for truth and the public's right to know are the primary obligations of journalists.
- 1.2 That the creation of tolerant, peaceful and just society depends upon the freedom of citizens to have access to quality media that respect the principles of pluralism, diversity and universal respect for human rights.
- 1.3 All journalists and media staff have the right to work in conditions of safety and security. They have the right to freedom of association and to collectively bargain for wages and conditions.
- 1.4 It is recognised by all the journalists organisations that the creation of a single national voice for journalists is central to advancing the social and professional rights of journalists in Sri Lanka.
- 1.5 Journalism and media policy in Sri Lanka must be guided by the following principles:
  - That media, whatever the mode of dissemination, are independent, tolerant and reflect diversity of opinion enabling full democratic exchange within and among all communities, whether based on geography, ethnic origins, religious belief or language;
  - That laws defend and protect the citizens' rights to freedom of information and the right to know;
  - That there is respect for decent working and professional conditions, through legally enforceable employment rights and appropriate regulations that guarantee editorial independence and recognition of the profession of journalism.

## **2. Editorial Independence**

- 2.1 All media, whether public or private, must uphold ethical conduct in journalism, support professional independence, exercise tolerance, and respect the democratic rights of all citizens.
- 2.2 The treatment of news and information as a commodity or for political ends or in support of cultural or religious objectives must not override or interfere with the duty of journalists and media to inform the public.
- 2.3 Media must never be used as instruments of propaganda to support violence and extremism.

- 2.4 Responsibility for ethical conduct in journalism rests with media professionals who should be responsible for drawing up codes of ethical conduct and who should establish credible and accountable systems of self-regulation.
- 2.5 There should be no legislation beyond the general law that interferes in matters that are the responsibility of working journalists: namely, the gathering, preparation, selection and transmission of information. Freedom of expression, press freedom and freedom of association should be guaranteed in law in accordance with international standards.
- 2.6 In addition, media policy should encourage the adoption of internal editorial statutes and other provisions safeguarding the independence of journalists in all Sri Lankan media.
- 2.7 The IFJ Code of Principles for the Conduct of Journalism and the Sri Lankan Professional Code of Conduct provide ethical codes supported by all national representative journalists' organizations and the basis for a common Sri Lankan understanding on ethical issues through voluntary adoption of journalists and publishers.

### **3. Media Pluralism, Public Service and Open Government:**

- 3.1 Sri Lanka must promote transparency, open government and freedom of information and ensure the participation of all citizens in developing a democratic culture to strengthen the cohesion of all communities.
- 3.2 Political parties and authorities should respect the role of media to report, in an independent and critical manner, on all aspects of government at all levels.
- 3.3 There should be no legal, regulatory or policy developments in media without full consultation with Sri Lankan media and journalists and their representative organizations.
- 3.4 The law must guarantee citizen's access to information and freedom of information at all levels of government.
- 3.5 There must be no undue pressure on media, exercised directly or indirectly, or interference in the work of journalists. Where such pressure is identified it should be properly investigated and appropriate remedies taken.
- 3.6 Public service values in media should be respected in all state-owned media. Urgent reform of the state media sector is needed with the following objectives:
- To remove all forms of direct political control over the public service media

- To create a framework for the administration of public service media, in line with international standards, through ethical, accountable and financially transparent structures
- To support editorial self-regulation by journalists and media professionals that will promote editorial independence and high standards of accuracy, reliability and quality in information services.

#### **4. Social Dialogue, Rights of Journalists and Media:**

- 4.1 Structures for dialogue should be set up bringing together representatives of media managements and the workforce through their representative media associations and trade unions to establish a basis for professional dialogue and industrial relations within Sri Lankan media.
- 4.2 There should be openness and transparency in the business and social affairs of all media enterprises including full public disclosure of political affiliations and ownership information.
- 4.3 Representatives of media and the workforce should agree an action plan to promote the economic and social development of Sri Lankan media, including provincial media, and improvements in working conditions through collective agreements according to the following priorities:
- To ensure that all employees have an employment contract setting out their wages and conditions and labour rights;
  - To improve the safety and security of journalists and media staff;
  - To limit the use of freelance and casual labour, and where they are used, to ensure proper remuneration;
  - To guarantee non-discrimination and gender equality at all levels in media;
  - To recognize the rights of trades unions to organize in media and to represent media workers including journalists;
  - To ensure diversity in access to journalism and to provide access to proper professional training.

## Practical program for follow-up actions

### **Within 6 months**

- Seek undertakings to advance press freedom in accordance with this declaration from each Presidential candidate for the November 17, 2005 Presidential Election
- Continue to campaign for the establishment of Freedom of Information legislation that will provide journalists genuine access to information
- Develop resources and training materials to support public service journalism including a handbook and training program
- Develop and administer a prize program that promotes and rewards public service journalism
- Engage in discussion with the PCC with the aim of strengthening the Sri Lankan code of ethics and building support and commitment among journalists for the code of conduct
- Create a mechanism for the SLWJA, FMETU, FMM, SLMMF and SLTMA to work towards the creation of a national media alliance of journalists with a view to bringing a resolution to a national congress of journalists within two years. This includes exploring the possibility of creating a national media centre, and a national journalists trade union
- Launch a broad-based campaign to promote genuine public service media in line with the IFJ's 2003 Colombo Declaration on Public Service Media, including building alliances with civil society
- Seek guarantees from the Presidential candidates that they will not interfere with government-owned media and will transform this media into public service media
- Seek a charter on ethical election reporting with editors and publishers including commitments to fair and balanced reporting, reporting driven by people not politics and a clear understanding of the duties of provincial duties.

### **Within one year**

- Conduct safety training for journalists in association with the IFJ and the International News Safety Institute
- Continue to campaign for the establishment of Freedom of Information legislation that will provide journalists genuine access to information
- Establish a regular forum series for debate and discussion on issues important to journalists
- Develop and promote a comprehensive program to promote diversity in media, including diversity in employment and promotion, developing multi-lingual skills for journalists and encouraging broad diversity in sources of information
- Convene a meeting for the creation of a national provincial working journalists association to promote professional development and solidarity and working rights supported by the national media organisations
- Set standard rates of payment and standard contract for freelance provincial journalists
- Work with the PCC and others to establish guidelines for ethical conduct in advertising.

### **Within 18 months**

- Continue to campaign for the establishment of Freedom of Information legislation that will provide journalists genuine access to information
- Draft a standard Charter of Editorial Independence to form the basis for discussion with media owners for establishing agreements that will properly support editorial independence.

### **Within two years**

- Continue to campaign for the establishment of Freedom of Information legislation that will provide journalists genuine access to information
- Look for ways of bringing journalists into the discussion and debate on ethics with the view of establishing ownership of ethics in journalism (including input into the current review of the editors code of ethics)
- Develop a charter to promote gender equity in media and in the representative media associations
- Promote avenues for discourse between journalists of different ethnic groups through regular meetings and the national media magazine
- Hold a national level conference, preceded by provincial level dialogue that revisits the Tholangamuwa Declaration.