

ngdangerously



port showed the way to other defence correspondents

tion in the
ad written
counterat-
unusually
delivered
the military
otests

om Award
) I will
Hyatt for
r making
howned US
ater to be
fghanistan
cluded Ted
ctress
oros, TV
were some

Seventh
ed to me
I had to
ne for me.
visit to the
ational
e House
agan. In the
of them,
work in
of your
for a wait-

er. I replied "No! My Arab uncle is buying this hotel tomorrow."

Space constraints prevent me from delving at length into another episode in 2008. It requires a detailed explanation. It is my fervent hope that I could place the facts in the public domain one day. One aspect is worth mentioning though for the damage it caused is irreparable. One night, I was alerted to a possible raid on my residence. It was reportedly to seize some documents related to a controversial transaction and thus track down my sources. I spoke with trusted sources. I was advised to close the house and move out. "If they want to search, let them break it open and do so. But don't leave anything incriminating," the source said. Before I left with my wife and daughter, there was a bonfire of partly completed lengthy handwritten outlines of my book. There was a pile of documents, some of them classified or secret. These were papers on which I was confirming the factual accuracy of various military operations, what followed and photographs. A lot of kerosene was poured to finish the job soon. If I was found with those documents, under the state of emergency that prevailed, it would have been enough cause to detain me. My claim of writing a book would have just been dismissed as sheer bluff.

The Eelam War IV was heating up towards the end of December 2008. Two vans packed with well-built men, openly displaying assault rifles, had arrived outside my house past 11 p.m. They were in civilian clothes. They tried to climb the high wall but found it difficult due to the strands of barbed wire on top. They were planning their next move, when a Police Emergency vehicle approached. They had hurriedly dispersed. An alert neighbour had tel-

ephoned 119. The next day, I received a telephone call. "We could not get you last night. But we will kill you soon if you don't stop writing," the caller said in Sinhala. This incident took place exactly ten days before Lasantha Wickremetunga, Editor of The Sunday Leader was killed. I made a complaint to the Mirihana Police.

I told a Cabinet Minister who is still holding office. He conveyed the news to President Rajapaksa. The President had ordered the then IGP Jayantha Wickremaratne to ask Mirihana Police to conduct patrols around my house. Though I had not asked, the Minister explained it was not possible to provide any security other than irregular police patrols. This was reportedly on the grounds that the war was escalating. He also cautioned me not to make too many people aware of the measures taken. Earlier, security provided to me on the basis of intelligence the government received was withdrawn. Appeals from various quarters were of no avail. Not even protests by media organisations.

Just two days after Mr. Wickremetunga's death, at midnight I was warned by an authoritative source that I was the next target. My suspicions were confirmed when he said about the presence of unidentified persons around my house. There were occasions when men on motorcycles followed me. There was one of them, his pistol bulging out of a tight bush shirt. He came in a motorcycle. He stopped a pedestrian a little away from my house and asked about my whereabouts. He least realised he was the driver of my vehicle. Details in the number plate was noted down and checked. It belonged to a lorry. I left home the next day and flew to Thailand. I lived for months, separated from my family and friends. There, I learnt what solitude means. Perhaps living in solitude is what drove even former Commander of the Army, Sarath Fonseka, who once wielded unlimited military power, to consent to negotiations for his release after 27 months in jail.

These are only a few snapshots from a long catalogue of encounters I have had as a journalist. There is both good and bad in them. The good is that there is a vast number in the defence and security establishments who stand for the truth. They want corruption exposed. Even more importantly, they were concerned about my safety. Otherwise I would not be living. They are bold enough to place their jobs and even their lives on the line. On the bad side are those corrupt and even the inept: Those who profited financially from the war. Truth is an embarrassment to them. They will go to any length to hide it, no matter what the consequences are.

I have had to face what I believe is more than my share of ugly encounters. This is because the Sunday Times is the pioneer in specialised reporting on matters related to both defence and security. This is through the Situation Report column. It is not an exaggeration to say most other media followed suit and began to have their own Defence Correspondents thereafter. In bringing to the public domain the varied aspects of the separatist war, I had to set my own benchmark. The principle criterion was to avoid the military's operations becoming public knowledge or privy to the enemy before or during an operation. That would have been treachery. I have strictly abided by this rule. But some politicians did not. I recall an

instance where a politician responsible for the military declared at several public meetings that his government's military aim was to capture Jaffna within weeks. That the Tiger guerrillas made preparations thereafter is now history. They even smuggled in military hardware to defend themselves.

There are readers who have often given well-meaning advice. I have benefited from them. There are others who have been bitterly critical. I have accepted such criticism with all humility. There are yet a few who are vituperative, driven by personal agendas and motivations. I have refused to bow to them. I never will. There was one President who years ago had the tax men investigate me. They looked for my hidden millions, both rupees and dollars. What he learnt perhaps exasperated him. "Meka hingannek ney," (this fellow is a beggar) he told a confidant.

I was one of the early or perhaps the first recipient of a dubious national honour – being called a traitor. There were government-sponsored demonstrations outside my house after a string of exposures in the Sunday Times. If indeed there were transgressions of the law, since treachery is an offence punishable with death, not one single state investigatory arm has questioned me. Therefore, threats and name calling, sometimes even killing of journalists, is to muffle their voices or shut them up forever.

The Sunday Times (Situation Report) column has always protected not only the country's sovereignty but also kept readers informed. In other words, in our own way, we have made a national contribution. In April 2003, when the Norwegian-brokered Ceasefire Agreement was in force, there was a move to formally recognise Sea Tigers, the ocean-going arm of the Tiger guerrillas. The Sunday Times (Situation Report) exclusively revealed that the head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), Major General (retd.) Tryggve Teleffson proposed that the Sri Lanka Navy should recognise the LTTE's Sea Tigers as "a de facto Naval unit and the LTTE should be excluded from the law concerning limitations on out-board motors (OBMs) horsepower." Until then, no one was aware. Thereafter, in what he called "Adjusted Proposals", Maj. Gen. Teleffson sought to confine the Sri Lanka Navy's exercises, particularly live firing to specified areas at sea. He also wanted to carve out separate areas in Sri Lanka's sovereign territorial waters for "training and live firing" after repeating his earlier call to recognise the Sea Tigers as a "de facto naval unit."

If not for the exclusive disclosure, the issue would have remained cloaked in secrecy. The Sri Lankan public would not have known that a non-state actor was to have its so-called navy formally recognised. This and another incident forced President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga to write to then Norwegian Prime Minister, Kjell Magne Bondevik, seeking the SLMM head's recall. He was withdrawn.

In addition, I reported on many occasions about a guerrilla build-up during the ceasefire. During this period, I revealed exclusively how a string of 18 guerrilla camps had sprung up with the objective of surrounding the Trincomalee port. It caught the UNP Government by surprise.

Please turn to Page 31