

Annual Review 2006

01. Introduction

The Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (PCCSL) was launched on October 15, 2003 and celebrated its third anniversary this year.

It is a self-regulatory mechanism of the Newspaper industry of Sri Lanka, which comprises the Newspaper Society of Sri Lanka, The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka and the Free Media Movement.

The PCCSL is the outcome of the Colombo Declaration on Press Freedom and Social Responsibility of 1998, which followed an international seminar held in Colombo and organized by the Newspaper Society of Sri Lanka, The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka and the Free Media Movement in association with the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, the World Association of Newspapers, the Commonwealth Press Union, the International Press Institute, Article 19 and the Media Institute of Southern Africa.

The PCCSL works on the principles of conciliation, mediation and arbitration under the Arbitration Act No 11 of 1995, which is modeled along the lines of the Press Complaints Commission of UK, Sweden and South Africa. The High Court enforces the PCCSL arbitration award, in the event a newspaper fails to publish the decision and if a complainant takes it to court.

The Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (PCCSL) continued its day-to-day operations amidst a major set back to its human resources following the departure of the CEO Ms. Manique Mendis in 2005 and the English Compliant Officer Mr. Vasana Wickramasena in 2006. Ms. Kshama Ranawana joined as English Complaints Officer in June 2006 while Mr. Ameen Hussain Tamil Complaints Officer has been associated with the PCCSL since its inception.

Despite the set backs, new advocacy and promotional activities were planned with the leadership of Sunanda Deshapriya as its acting Head and carried out successfully.

02. Moves to re-activate Press Council

Following reports of the Governments intention to re activate the Press Council a delegation comprising the Newspaper Society of Sri Lanka, The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka, the Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, Muslim Media Forum, Tamil Media Forum, Sri Lanka Environmental Journalists Forum, Media Employees Trade Union, and the Sri Lanka Press Institute met Media Minister Anura Priyadharshana Yapa on June 27, 2006 and presented a memorandum in support of the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka. During the meeting the Minister agreed to set up a committee made up of those supporting the PCCSL and those who want the Press Council re activated to examine the pros and cons. However, up to date such a committee has not been established.

03. Complaints

The PCCSL during the period under review (January to December 2006) received 128 complaints with most of them being against the Sinhala print media.

Fifty seven complaints were outside the Code of Professional Practice. Eleven corrections were published. Thirty-three complaints were unresolved since in some cases complainants did not follow through with the process or as in a few cases there was a poor response from some of the Editors and the PCCSL was functioning without a full compliment of staff. Fifteen complaints were where the Complainant did not adhere to the procedure while in the balance 12 complaints; the PCCSL received either a telephone call with a promise to attend to the matter, while in some cases a written response from the editor was forwarded to the complainant.

Complaints were received against the following newspapers:

Daily News, Dinamina, Sunday Observer, Silumina, Sirikatha, Lankadeepa, Navaliya, Tharunee, Regina, Gaveshi, Irida Lankadeepa, Sunday Island, Divaina, Irida Divaina, Lanka Irida, Sangrahaya, Eelanadu, Uthyan, Sangunatham, Muragala, Priyadari, Divamina, Buddusarana, Maaruthaya, Sunday Leader, Irudina, Sathdina, The Nation, Irida Rivira, Lakbima, Irida Lakbima, Virakesari, Thinakkural, Sudar Oli and Ravaya.

The PCCSL also received a few complaints against advertisements published in newspapers as well as news items and other programs in the electronic media. These were forwarded to the relevant authorities.

The "Rights of Readers" announcement was sent to all newspapers for publication. The Wijeya Group, Virakesari Group and the Lakbima Group carried the announcement. The same was published as a news item in the Thinakaran. However, the Wijeya Group continues to publish the "Rights of Readers" announcement on behalf of the PCCSL.

From June 18 to 30, the PCCSL monitored the daily newspapers in all the three languages on news reports connected with the ethnic conflict and a presentation was made to the Editors and the business community vis-a-vie the media bias in its reportage of the ethnic conflict.

04. Dispute Resolution Council

The Dispute Resolution Council (DRC) met on one occasion. The Chairman of the 11-member Dispute Resolution Council is former Secretary General of Parliament and Ombudsman Mr. Sam Wijesinha. The members are Dr. Devanesan Nesiya, Ms. Sithie Tiruchelvam, Mr Javid Yusuf, Mr. Lucille Wijewardene, Mr. Dion Schoorman, Mr. G. S. Perera, Ms. Mallika Wanigasundera and Mr. Siri Ransinghe. Mr. Jayatilleke de Silva and Mr. Pramod de Silva were appointed in place of Mr. P Balasingham and Mr Dharmasiri Bandaranaike whose two-year term 'expired.

05. Code of Professional Practice Review Committee

The Code of Professional Practice Review Committee that was set up on May 30, 2005 on a recommendation made by The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka to review the Code of Professional Practice had one meeting but was unable to proceed due to the resignation of the English Complaints Officer who was handling the subject.

The Code Review Committee comprised:former Vice President of the International Court of Justice Judge Dr. Christopher G. Weeramantry, Vice Chancellor of the

University of Sri Jayawardenepura and President of the Presidential Task Force against Crime Ven. Prof. Bellanvilla Wimalaratana Thera, Chairman Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Secretary Ministry of Education Dr. Tara de Mel, Director National Child Protection Association, Executive Director South Asia Women's Fund and Consultant UNICEF Colombo office Dr. Hiranthi Wijemanne, Senior Lecturer Faculty of Law University of Colombo Dr. Deepika Udagama, Professor of Tamil University of Jaffna Prof. A. Shanmugasadas, former Editor-in-Chief and Editorial Director Upali Newspapers Limited Mr. Edmund Ranasinghe and later Chief Executive Officer Young Asia Television Mr. Hilmy Ahamed and English Complaints Officer of the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka Mr. Vasana Wickramasena who was appointed convener.

06. Code of Professional Practice for TV journalists

The PCCSL, through the Sri Lanka Press Institute, facilitated two workshops were held with senior journalists of the TV industry to formulate a Code of Practice for television journalists. The workshops were chaired by Dr. D. B. Nihalsinha, while ITN Chairman, Anura Siriwardena, MTV/MBC News Director Arjuna Ranawana and Arunachalam Selladurai of 'ShakJhi TV were resource persons. Journalists from all TV stations with the exception of Swarnavahini and TNL participated. The draft code was circulated to all TV stations for their views and comments.

07. Membership of PCCSL

The membership of the PCCSL stands at 49 as of December 31, 2006 following the demise of Mr. Ajith Samaranyake in November 2006.

08. Awareness Programmes

08a. PCCSL Promotion Campaign

A promotional campaign was drafted and submitted for approval by the PCCSL Board.

This includes a brochure of the PCCSL, Poster, A Right of Reply and Public Interest notice to be published in newspapers, TV and radio propaganda advertisements, and a mailing campaign. PCCSL staff also participated in several radio and TV interviews and programs.

08b. Workshops/Seminars

- Several presentations on the role of the PCCSL were also held for journalists and members of the public. A 90 minute presentation which would help raise awareness amongst various groups has also been prepared
- Workshops for Inter-news and Radio workshop in Matara. Introduction to "What is news", "News Values and Sources" and Ethics in the Media" and criminal defamation.

- Interview at ITN to introduce the PCCSL.
- Talk on Media and Ethics for the synod of the Diocese of Colombo, Church of Ceylon
- Presentation to the UN on the role of the PCCSL.
- Two-day workshop on media ethics for provincial journalists in the Badulla District
- A talk on media ethics for provincial journalists at a conference organized by "the South Asian Free Media Association in Colombo.
- The PCCSL was represented at a conference organized by the Press Council of India New Delhi by Dr. Devanesan Nesiya who spoke on "Journalism, Ethics and Society the Age of Globalization."

08c. Debating Competition

On the recommendations of the DRC to conduct a debating competition in all three languages, the PCCSL wrote to schools in the Colombo District, both state and private, inviting their students to participate. Since the dates were clashing with the year end examinations it was decided to move the competition to the first semester of the New Year.

08d. Orientation/training

In November, the English Complaints Officer visited the Press Complaints Commission of the UK for an orientation.

In September, the English Complaints Officer followed a four-day training on "Doing Ethics" conducted by the International Federation of Journalists through the Sri Lanka Press Institute.

08e. Visit by Maldivian Media Minister

In September, the Media Minister of the Maldives visited the PCCSL to study the system of self-regulation.

08f. Visit to Editors

During the latter part of the year the Director General of the Sri Lanka Press Institute who was the acting Chief Executive Officer of the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka, along with the PCCSL staff had several meetings with Editors and newspaper publishers. Among them were the Lake House Group, Wijeya Group, Navamani Group, Virakesa Group, Lakkima Group, Rivira publications and Standard publications.

8g. Website of PCCSL

A website designed along the lines of the UK Press Complaints Commission has been in operation since the latter part of 2006. Complainants can now lodge their complaints online. The web page gives the Code of Professional Practice as well as steps taken in resolving complaints.

09. AGM and Board meetings

The PCCSL Board of Directors continued to meet once every month. The first Annual General Meeting (AGM), following the membership expansion took place on December 12, 2006.

In terms of new amendments to the Articles of Association that were passed at the AGM to broaden the representation of the Board the former Board of Directors tendered their resignations to facilitate the appointment of a new Board.

The amendments provide for a Board of nine Directors to be elected - three from the SLPI, three from the founding media organizations, and three from the expanded membership

Board members: Mr. Ranjit Wijewardene (Chairman, nominee of SLPI), Mr. Nimal Welgama (nominee of the Newspaper Society of Sri Lanka), Mr. Sinha Ratnatunga (nominee of the Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka), Mr. Uvindu Kurukulasuriya (nominee of the Free Media Movement) Mr. Manik de Silva and Mr. Waruna Karunatileke (nominees of the SLPI), Ms. Namini Wijedasa, Mr. M. N. Ameen and Mr Sundara Nihathamani de Mel elected by the general membership of the PCCSL.

WSR/end