

Speech

By

D B Wijetunga



OFFICE OF THE
PRIME MINISTER
OF THE DEMOCRATIC
SOCIALIST REPUBLIC
OF SRI LANKA

PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH DELIVERED BY HON D.B. WIJETUNGA
PRIME MINISTER ON 15th MAY 1991 AT S.L.F.I. IN
INAUGURATING THE SEMINAR ON THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN A NATIONAL CRISIS.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Sri Lanka and to inaugurate this regional seminar on the "Role of Media in a National Crisis".

I am happy that this meeting is jointly sponsored by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) based in Singapore and the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association. AMIC is not a stranger to our country. For over two decades they have held many seminars and training programmes in the Asian region, and in particular in Sri Lanka. Their diverse activities have been very useful to our Media Personnel.

As politicians, we have to constantly interact with working journalists. I am particularly aware of this vital, and sometimes difficult relationship, as my first ministerial responsibility was to hold the post of Minister of Information and Broadcasting in 1977. Since then I have had the closest relationship with the media and have been a keen observer of changes in the media scene. I am therefore happy to use this occasion to recognise their valuable contribution to the expansion of democracy in Sri Lanka. May I take this opportunity of congratulating the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association for taking the initiative in arranging this seminar in co-operation with AMIC.

We have with us in this assembly delegates from several South Asian Countries. They are all leaders in their respective professions. I extend to you a special welcome and sincerely hope that your stay in Sri Lanka will be both pleasant and fruitful. I hope you will be able to carry with you happy memories of your brief visit to our country.

The theme of this seminar "The Role of the Media in a National Crisis" is indeed appropriate for both our time and our region. Almost all the nations of the South Asian region have in the recent past gone through serious crisis. Most of these crisis have arisen as a result of ethnic problems. Political, economic and social areas too have seen conflicts which have grave repercussions on all our societies.

All of us live in multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural societies. All our countries have majority communities with a strong sense of cultural identity. They cry out for the redress of grievances which accumulated during the colonial period. On the other hand, the minorities in our countries, who have played a significant role in building up our modern nation states, raise a demand for the recognition of their own ethnic and cultural identity. Each group thinks that it has not received its due. Managing these contradictions is no easy task.

All these hopes and aspirations of majority groups, as well as minorities, have generally been articulated through democratic institutions. In some cases however, for whatever reason, groups have gone beyond the democratic process and have attempted to remedy their grievances, real or perceived, through violent means. This armed

conflict has often sent our societies into a state of crisis which impinges on the future of all social groups, whether they are directly involved with the conflict or not.

The media are the agencies that reflect the agenda of public discourse. Thus they become key players in both the aggravation and resolution of national conflict. True enough, we politicians like to think that we set the agenda for action, but often it is not so. It is the media, and rightly so, which highlight the issues of national concern.

As adherents of democracy we should welcome this dialogue. It is in such an interplay of the different institutions of civil society that we will be able to fashion democratic attitudes and qualities which serve the common good.

It must of course be realised that the media are also social institutions. They are themselves subject to the pulls and pressures that exist in society. In our region we live in societies where media tends to be segmented in terms of language, politics and pressure groups. Just as other institutions in society are scrutinised by the media, the public has a right to inquire and be critical of the way the media conducts itself.

A discussion on media rights, must always be balanced by an awareness of its responsibilities. I am not suggesting that this critical attitude should be directed only at the media. Every social institution must be aware, at least as an exercise in self scrutiny, that rights go hand in hand with responsibilities. This balancing

of rights and responsibilities is a very complex matter. They are matters which should be discussed and studied. The wealth of experience which the print and electronic journalists gathered here today bring to such a discussion will help us in the unravelling many of these difficult issues.

My last thought is related to the democratic spirit. All these discussions must have as a goal—the expansion of the liberties and democratic rights of the people. We live in an age where media helps us to look outwards and to be more compassionate. Its greatest contribution is that it can lift us from insularity.

We no longer live in isolation. The experiences of our neighbours who also have gone through numerous crisis are valuable to us. Though we are given different labels as nations, communities, ethnic groups etc. we all have common aspirations. We must get on with the job of giving decent food, clothing, shelter, education and employment to the vast masses of our people. In this the media has a vital role to play with a sense of responsibility.

I wish this seminar all success.