

Sri Lankan police step up harassment of estate workers after bomb explosion

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Following a bomb explosion on a railway track in the estate area of central Sri Lanka, the security forces have intensified their intimidation of Tamil-speaking plantation workers. The blast occurred in the evening of October 2 near Nanu-oya railway station, about 300 kilometres from the capital of Colombo.

The following day police set up checkpoints near the site of the explosion and started to question and harass workers. Over the next few days, 14 youth and some elderly workers were arrested. During an extensive police search operation in Nuwara-eliya, a major plantation town, 50 youth were detained, questioned and then later released.

In the early hours of October 3, police raided the Desford Group plantation belonging to Hayley's Plantations. Armed police forced open doors at 3 a.m., awakening workers and their children, questioned them, searched their rooms and found nothing. Workers told a WSWS reporting team that small children screamed in fear.

One worker, Ramasamy, asked in exasperation: "Why they do harass us? Trade union leaders don't do anything against it." An elderly female worker was angry about the harassment and said vehemently that workers did not engage in this type of activities. "When youths are arrested without reason, it affects their whole future," she said. Among them was a 16-year-old student who had been due to sit a test the following day.

Most of those detained were taken into custody at police checkpoints. Every one over 18 years of age in Sri Lanka must possess an identity card issued by the government and show it to the police or army at checkpoints or during search operations.

On October 5, P. Rajaratnam was detained while coming back from work in Nuwara-eliya. He was

unable to produce his identity card because the authorities had not issued one to him. Rajaratnam pleaded that at home, just 150 metres away, he had the receipt issued when his application was handed over. But police would not listen to him, bundled him into the police truck along with others and took him to the Nanu-oya police station.

The 14 detained workers and youth were held in a small cell. Another six workers later joined them. None were given dinner or breakfast. Rajaratnam was released the following day along with two others and told to come to the police if any incident like the explosion occurred in future. They were also asked to inform the police about intruders on their estate.

According to the police and media, the bomb had been planted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE), against whom a protracted war is being waged in the North and East of the country. The claim is part of a concerted campaign by the Peoples Alliance government, the media and the police alleging "LTTE infiltration" into the estate areas where hundreds of thousands of Tamil-speaking workers live.

A report in the English-language daily the *Island* cited "police sources" saying that the bomb had been brought from Batticaloa—an Eastern Province town controlled partly by the army and partly by the LTTE—hidden in a curd container and then detonated by remote control. It alleged that the plan was to derail a goods train carrying oil tanks or a crowded passenger train. No evidence was provided for these claims.

The newspaper reports were also full of contradictions on basic facts. The *Island* article reported that an LTTE member ran into a nearby tea estate after seeing a worker on the track. The same reporter, writing in the Sinhalese sister newspaper *Divayina*, referred to a number of "tiger terrorists"

running into the nearby jungle. Articles in three different newspapers, all citing “police sources,” reported that the bomb was variously 10 kilograms, 5 kilograms and 1 kilogram in weight.

Without a shred of evidence, other than the same unnamed “police sources,” the media went on to whip up racial hostility towards Tamil workers in the estate areas, claiming that “even girls from the plantation area have joined the LTTE” and that the LTTE had some 300 trained cadres in the area.

The WSWs team spoke to two railway workers and another worker who had been cited in media reports as eyewitnesses. All three angrily said the papers had blown the incident out of proportion. Dhanapala, who works at Nuwara-eliya, heard the explosion and saw a man going away quickly, covering his face. The two railway workers said they heard the explosion but did not see it. Only about six inches of track had been destroyed. They informed the police and the stationmaster and the track was quickly repaired.

Discrepancies in the media reports are not accidental. This is not the first time that the media have cooked up reports as the basis for anti-Tamil propaganda. But it does pose the question of who did plant the bomb. Such a blast could just as easily have been planted by one of the Sinhala chauvinist groups or the Sri Lankan security forces themselves as a pretext for intensifying operations in the area.

One such organisation, Sinhala Veera Vidahana or Sinhala Heroes' Forum, has recently escalated its branch-building activities in the plantation areas as well as its tirades against the Tamil-speaking plantation workers. It operates in close collaboration with the police, army and local businessmen.

The real target of the anti-Tamil propaganda is not so much the LTTE but the plantation workers themselves who are among the most exploited layers of the Sri Lankan working class. Unemployment is rampant among young people on the plantations and real wages have fallen. With a slackening export market, the planters have called for a six-rupee cut in the wages of the tea plantation workers.

There have already been lightning strikes and other forms of protest against increasing workloads, provocations by management, and poor health facilities. The government can no longer rely on the trade unions to control the anger of workers. Last year

hundreds of thousands of plantation workers went on strike, in defiance of the union leaders' call for a return to work after their compromise deal with employers and the government.

Under the guise of countering “LTTE infiltration,” the government has intensified security measures in the plantation areas. The police and military, working alongside groups like the Sinhala Heroes' Forum, are increasingly aggressive and routinely detain and question Tamil-speaking youth.

Already about 40 estate workers, mostly youth, have been taken into custody and have been held in detention camps pending trial for months. Another 21 workers were taken in custody nearly a year ago on trumped-up charges. Just this month, 14 of them were finally released on bail of 10,000 rupees or US\$140—the equivalent of about four months' wages for a plantation worker—and under the strictest of bail conditions.



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