# Hundreds of Tamils rounded up in security dragnet of Sri Lankan capital

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Hundreds of Tamils were rounded up last week in a security sweep through the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo last Friday following a suicide bomb attack outside the Prime Minister's office and the assassination of a leading Tamil politician, Kumar Ponnambalam, on January 5.

More than 5,000 security personnel from the army, navy, air force and police were involved in the operation, which began with the snap announcement of a complete curfew on the city from midnight last Thursday and extending to noon on Friday. Residents had just half an hour's notice to be off the streets. The main target was the predominantly Tamil areas of Colombo and the southern Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia area.

Estimates of the number of Tamils detained vary from 1,200 to 3,000. According to the *Sunday Times* newspaper, the number dragged in for questioning was 1,563—each was processed through a tight screening, which involved identification by hooded fingermen, and the videotaping and photographing of the "suspects".

The interrogations were conducted by a number of police and security agencies, including the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), the Counter Subversion Unit (CSU), the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID), the Crime Detective Bureau (CDB), the Directorate of Internal Intelligence (DII) and the Directorate of Military Intelligence.

The decision to launch the massive security operation was taken 48 hours before at a security conference presided over by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the chiefs of the armed forces, the police and the intelligence services. The government earlier claimed that it had received information that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had infiltrated 10 suicide bombers into the city and were planning to kill top government leaders and other VIPs.

The suicide bombing on January 5 outside the Prime Minister's office, which killed 14 people, was the third such attack in three weeks in the capital city and suburbs. The explosions are believed to have been carried out by the LTTE, which is at a war with the Colombo regime, demanding a separate state for the Tamil minority in the north and east of the island.

All road and rail access to the area was sealed off by troops. Thousands of people were forced to get off their trains at suburban stations. Government offices, private businesses, schools and banks were all closed during the curfew.

Colombo City had been divided into areas for checking. In a house-to-house search all people without proper identification papers or an explanation of their presence in Colombo were detained. In Sri Lanka everyone must carry a national identity card issued by the government. People from the war-torn northern and the eastern provinces must carry other papers too. A number of people had their special permits to live in Colombo withdrawn.

Those detained by the police had been either herded into police vehicles or were forced to walk to a designated police station. Government servants, students and the elderly were not spared. Among those detained were 200 minors.

The detainees were concentrated in five police stations: Maradana, Bambalapitiya, Mount Lavinia Mutual and Kotahena. Over 1,000 were detained from the central Colombo area and 450 were rounded up in the southern areas of the city. The number picked up in the northern Kotahena and Modera areas was 80 and 70 respectively.

The detainees were held at police stations and not

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permitted to see relatives and friends, even to get bare necessities. Relatives who gathered at the police stations waited in vain for hours to find out the fate of those arrested. In most of the places they were not supplied with anything to eat until noon.

Three days after the arrests it was reported that 87 detainees were kept for further questioning by a special CID team. But according to the report in the *Sunday Times* newspaper, the entire operation, involving 5,000 personnel, uncovered "no armaments, explosives or any other subversive material or devices." A subsequent army search claims to have uncovered a single "suicide jacket" after a raid on a "safe house" in Kotahena.

The security dragnet of Colombo is part of a broader witchhunt instigated by the Kumaratunga government against Tamils. Colombo newspapers reported on Monday that another 47 "LTTE suspects" were arrested in the residential area to the east of Colombo, around Nugegoda-Mirihana, on Sunday. At Kandy, in the central hill country, about 60 people were arrested and in the central plantation area of Dickoya-Maskeliya 14 youths have been taken into custody.

A senior police official told the state-sponsored *Sunday Observer* that the cordon-and-search operation heralded a higher level of security and that similar search operations without prior warning will be conducted regularly. Meanwhile, in a report that can only encourage anti-Tamil chauvinism, *Janatha*, a government-sponsored Sinhala newspaper accused the Tamil daily, *Veerakesari*, of helping LTTE members to escape the sweep, by tipping them off.

The fact that Kumaratunga has resorted to such measures, just weeks after her re-election, is a sign of crisis. The military has sustained significant losses after an LTTE offensive in November in the Wanni area and now the security situation in Colombo has deteriorated. According to some reports, the president has instructed her ministers to restrict their movements for security reasons.

The unstable political atmosphere has impacted directly on business. The Colombo stock exchange has declined continuously over the past few days, bringing it close to an all-time low. Stockbrokers complained that investors have been shaken by the bombings and have pulled out of the market. In such a situation, one can only conclude that desperation and outright panic are beginning to grip the government and ruling circles as a whole.

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