Protesters accuse Sri Lankan security forces of murdering a young Tamil woman

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More than 500 villagers staged a demonstration outside the navy camp at Pungudutivu in northern Sri Lanka on December 31 to protest the rape and murder of 20-year-old Saravanabhavananda Kurrukkal Sarathamball, a mother of a four-year-old child. The protestors carried placards accusing member of the armed forces of carrying out the brutal crime.

The demonstration continued for four hours despite harassment and threats by naval personnel and attempts by the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) to placate the protestors by promising to question authorities and demand an inquiry. The EPDP is a partner in the ruling Peoples Alliance coalition and works closely with the armed forces through a system of so-called Citizen Committees.

Four uniformed men abducted Sarathamball, the daughter of a local Hindu priest, from her home on the evening of December 28. Her 18-year-old brother S. Rajasekara Sarma explained in a statement: “She was staying with me at home. Around 8.30pm, four persons in black uniforms entered into our house with arms. They threatened my sister and me. They spoke in colloquial broken Tamil.

“Two of them assaulted me and accused me of false charges. They tied my hands and [covered my] eyes. After this assault they carried me away and put me behind my house... Another two persons carried my sister away to a nearby deserted house and subjected her to sexual violence and then murdered [her].”

Pungudutivu is one of the islands around the Jaffna Peninsula in the north of Sri Lanka that has been under virtual martial law since the Sri Lankan armed forces won back control of the region in bitter fighting against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1995-96.

Despite a military curfew in the area, many local people, on hearing the heart-rending cry of Sarathamball's brother, gathered on the night of the incident. With the help of a kerosene oil lamp, they searched for her but all they could find were some of her clothes.

Her neighbours then went to the nearby navy camp and made a complaint. A navy spokesman turned them away saying: “We don't know anything”. When the search was restarted the following morning, Sarathamball's body was found 20 yards from her house. Her naked body was covered with dry palmyrah leaves.

Local people told a *WSWS* reporter:

“We organised this demonstration not just to register our protest against this raping and murder, but this has become a matter for self-respect, not only for women, but also for men. That's why we staged this demonstration carrying dry palmyrah leaves. We wanted to show the world the undignified manner in which the human beings in these areas are treated—human beings are considered not worth more than a *kaavolai* (dry palmyrah leaf).”

They explained that there had previously been many unreported cases of harassment and even sexual violence by security forces. According to the village people, whenever women and girls passed through a military barrier or checkpoint they were subjected to various kinds of dirty antics by the armed forces. They said that some time back military personnel on the island had raped a mute woman. They were concerned that the situation would get worse.

In response to the protests, the EPDP district organiser, V. K. Jegan, was forced to issue a statement condemning the armed forces. “The navy camp is situated 500 yards from where this incident occurred. Further, during the period of curfew nobody else can

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infiltrate into this area. Therefore this is the work of the naval forces," he said.

The navy was also compelled to change its previous attitude of complete indifference. The naval commanding officer, Kayts, promised: "We will hold an immediate inquiry... and the people responsible for this will be identified and brought to justice."

In Colombo, the Information Department of the Peoples Alliance government released a statement saying that President Chandrika Kumaratunga had ordered a full inquiry to "report back to her immediately for deterrent action against the culprits irrespective of the ranks or status." In the past, such inquiries have been little more than thinly disguised cover-ups.

A magistrate's inquiry was held on January 5. Sarathamball's brother described the nature of his sister's injuries: "When I visited the place where the dead body was lying, it was covered by a blue saree. I removed that and saw... I saw bleeding through her ears. There were number of biting marks all over her body. There were biting marks in her legs too." He told the magistrate that he was scared of remaining in his own home and was taken by police to stay with his father on the island of Analaitivu.

In the absence of qualified medical personnel in the hospital in Jaffna town, Sarathamball's body was sent to Colombo for a full judicial medical examination. A report issued by the Colombo judicial medical officer on January 9 stated that Sarathamball had been raped and the death had occurred due to suffocation.

In August 1996, army personnel stationed in the Kaithady military camp within the Jaffna municipality arrested a schoolgirl, Krishathi Kumaraswamy, raped her and brutally murdered her along with her mother, brother and a relative. Such acts are part of the climate of fear and intimidation engendered by the Sri Lankan armed forces against Tamils in the north and east of the country.

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