

Sri Lankan security forces continue witchhunt against Tamils

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The Sri Lankan government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga has responded to a series of bomb attacks, military reversals and its own deepening political crisis by lashing out at the minority Tamil population with a wave of police harassment and repression. Both the government and the Colombo media base themselves on the racist premise that Tamils as a whole are responsible for the actions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whose perspective is a separate Tamil state.

The government's campaign began after a suicide bomb attack outside the Prime Minister's office in Colombo on January 5. Security forces imposed a 14-hour total curfew on the capital, deployed nearly 5,000 troops and police and rounded up thousands in the predominantly Tamil areas of the capital for interrogation. Since then the army and police have engaged in numerous "search operations" in Tamil areas, towns and villages, all in the name of apprehending "LTTE suspects".

The National Security Council (NSC) recently decided that all residents in the Batticaloa District must obtain a security clearance and carry a special identity card. The NSC, which is the country's top military body—presided over by the president—claimed that the decision was necessary to prevent the LTTE from using Batticaloa in the Eastern Province to infiltrate into southern Sri Lanka, including Colombo.

The NSC decision affects up to 600,000 people. Batticaloa residents will have to carry two identity cards—one issued nationally to every citizen over 18 and the new card. Without the special identity card, they will not be permitted to enter other districts, particularly Colombo.

On January 28, thousands of Batticaloa residents defied threats by the military and staged a hartal—mass

agitation combining strikes, shop closures and protests—against the new measures. Tamil and Muslim political parties have also demanded the reversal of the NSC move.

Elsewhere in the Eastern Province, a new round of combined army-police search operations has taken place. Villagers in Muttur, Pachchanoor, Peryaveli, Mallikathivu, Pattithidal, Bharathpuram, Manatchenai, Menkamam, Munnam Podi Vettai and Fifth colony were rounded up and ordered to go to Mallikathivu for questioning. The town of Kalmunai was surrounded and searched on January 31.

North-Central Province, which borders the war-ravaged Northern and Eastern provinces, has also been subject to the witchhunt. On January 10, police raided hotels and rice processing mills, detaining 250 youth who had fled to the province to escape the war and find work.

A second security sweep took place in Colombo on January 22. More than 3,000 men and women in the predominantly Tamil area of Wellawetta were taken into custody, regardless of their age, videoed and forcibly fingerprinted. "Spotters" drawn from armed Tamil groups operating with the Sri Lankan military were used to point out LTTE suspects.

Thousands more were detained in similar operations in the Colombo suburbs of Wattla, Negombo, Ja-ela, Kandana, Peliyagoda, Gampaha and Kelaniya. The police hunted down young Tamils staying in lodges and, in some cases, humiliated young women by taking them away in their nightdresses. A number of pregnant women and sick people were detained for lengthy periods at police stations.

The police have tried to justify their dragnet operations in the greater Colombo area by saying that they have been able to arrest "several LTTE suspects,"

including nine “LTTE leaders” and two female suicide bombers. But little evidence has been provided to support their claims.

Police harassment and intimidation has also intensified in the plantation areas—such as Kandy, Hatton, Maskeliya, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Bandarawela, Passara, Matugama—which are in the hill districts of central Sri Lanka where the majority of estate workers are Tamil speaking.

At Bandarawela and Diyathalawa, 230 km from Colombo, more than 150 Tamils have been arrested during searches. At the Ambatenna estate of Mathugama, 60 km from Colombo, several youth were arrested during a combined army and police operation conducted on the Hindu festival day of Thaipongal.

WSWS reporters visited plantations in the Maskeliya area where police detained 14 Tamil youth in search operations on January 6, 7 and 8 and subjected them to severe interrogation. The police allege that those detained may have undergone special training in LTTE camps and been involved in bomb attacks on buses, oil tanks, telecom towers and electricity transformers.

The 14 are: Samson, Pradeepan, Siva Prakasan Jayanthian, Thangavale Rajakumaran, Ramiah Suresh, Benedict Prasanth Roy, Rajendran, Thiyagarajah, Mohomed Rias, Prabakaran, Karunanathan, Chandradas, Suganthan and Pushpakumar. Their parents refuted the police allegations and pointed to the fact that five of those detained have already been released without charge.

Siva Prakasan Jayanthian, 19, was arrested when police and Criminal Investigations Department (CID) officers surrounded the Glenugie tea plantations at Maskeliya on the night of January 6. Although the police said he would be released the next day, he has been detained at Ginigathena police station. His parents, who have only been able to see their son once, said he produced an identity card but the police took no notice. They reported the arrest to the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), one of the main trade unions in the plantations, but nothing happened.

Plainclothes police also arrested Thangavale Rajakumaran, 24, from Deeside tea plantation on January 6. The police told his parents that Rajakumaran was being taken to Maskeliya police station but they found out later that he was being detained at the Norton police station. The following day police returned with

dogs to search the house and confiscated his diary and an old cellular phone. His father was given permission to see him only once but was not allowed to talk to his son. On the same night, Benedict Prasanth Roy, a young worker from the Brownswick tea plantations was taken into police custody and held at Norton police.

Ramiah Suresh, a 26-year-old father of three, is a small businessman. When searching his home, police confiscated a few packets of lime powder used for vegetable cultivation, and some vitamin powder for cows. When his mother protested, police said: “How could you know whether these would or wouldn't be used for bombs?” The media subsequently reported that an LTTE suspect had been captured with explosives.

The raids in the plantation areas are part of the continuing harassment and intimidation of the most oppressed layers of the Sri Lankan working class. Over the past five years, the Kumaratunga government has completed the privatisation of the plantations and presided over a series of cutbacks to wages and working conditions. The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka is waging a continuing campaign for the release of six Tamil youth held for over 18 months without trial on trumped-up charges.



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