

Sri Lankan police order female "LTTE suspect" to strip publicly at gunpoint

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A particularly outrageous incident in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo last Saturday gives a glimpse of the humiliation, harassment and persecution routinely directed by the security forces against anyone thought to be a member of the country's Tamil minority.

At about 10.30 am, plainclothes officers from the Ministerial Security Division (MSD)—a special police unit set up to protect government ministers—stopped a young woman who was walking along a street in the city centre. They demanded to see the national identity card that everyone over 18 years must carry.

Then, on “suspicion” that the woman was a suicide bomber sent to the capital by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the MSD officers alerted troops manning a nearby checkpoint. She was taken to the road island, and while the security men took cover, ordered at gunpoint to strip off her clothes in broad daylight.

Even though the security officers found no explosives or weapons, they bundled the woman into a jeep and took her to the nearby Slave Island police station. During the interrogation, it emerged that the woman was Sinhalese, not Tamil, and came from a rural area near Kurunegala, 80 kilometres from Colombo. She is still in custody.

The *Sunday Times* reported that during the incident the country's security chiefs were notified and an air force helicopter was put on alert ready for a “possible strike.”

As part of the ongoing war against the separatist LTTE, the Sri Lankan military and police have turned Colombo into an armed camp. Security checkpoints manned by heavily armed troops have been erected at every access road to Colombo city and at almost every junction in the city centre. The military and police view every Tamil as an LTTE suspect and frequently subject

them to questioning and searches. Arbitrary arrest and detention without trial are commonplace.

Every suspected LTTE bombing or attack is followed by police witchhunts and chauvinist anti-Tamil campaigns in the media and by racist groups such as the Sinhala Heroes Forum. After such an attack close to Colombo that killed 23 people on March 10, dozens of Tamils were rounded up by police and detained as suspects.

Several women's organisations have written to the President Chandrika Kumaratunga protesting against the humiliating harassment of the woman.

The Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) in charge of Colombo Central Division, D.A. de Fonseka, attempted to justify the actions of the security personnel. He issued a statement baldly denying that the woman had been forced to strip. Fonseka claimed that the woman had only been asked to raise the top of her attire by a female member of the Air Force.

A government-appointed member of the “anti-harassment committee” M. Yogarajan told the *WSWS* that the police were lying and that he would raise the issue in every forum he could. “It is an intolerable situation that security men strip women suspected of being suicide bombers. If this is condoned no woman is safe in the street. It could happen to your wife or your daughter.” Yogarajan is an MP for the Ceylon Workers Congress, a partner in the ruling Peoples Alliance, which set up the anti-harassment committee to try to defuse the anger of those subject to police intimidation.

A more sinister side to the incident emerged in comments by the Officer In Charge of the Slave Island police station, Jagath Jagodaarachchi, attacked those criticising the action of the MSD officers. He explained that following a suicide bomb attack outside the Prime Minister's office in Colombo on January 5, the police

were heavily criticised for questioning the female bomber rather than shooting her dead. His remarks carry the definite implication that in the future any woman “acting strangely” when confronted by police should be killed on the spot.



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