

EPDP thugs in the service of Colombo regime: A serious threat to the lives of SEP members in Sri Lanka

Our correspondent
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Physical attacks and serious threats by the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) against members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the north of Sri Lanka make clear that the EPDP is nothing but a group of mercenary thugs acting on behalf of the Peoples Alliance (PA) government to suppress opposition to its policies among Tamil people.

On March 20, local EPDP officials called a meeting of Tamil fishermen and their families on the island of Kayts off the Jaffna peninsula. The EPDP, a component of the People's Alliance, controls the local council and enforces the orders of the government and the army, including severe restrictions on the activities of fishermen. In the name of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the military have imposed what amounts to undeclared martial law throughout the Jaffna peninsula.

But on this occasion, the fishermen and their families stayed away. Fed up with the military restrictions that make the difficult task of earning a living from the sea next to impossible, angry at the constant harassment, intimidation and racist taunts of the security forces, and disgusted with conduct of EPDP officials who rule the area like their own private feudal fiefdom, the locals boycotted the meeting in protest.

The military dominates every aspect of their lives. Navy gunboats have regularly damaged or destroyed fishing gear. Several fishermen have been shot at when the navy claimed that their boats had drifted into security zones. Thousands of fishing families have been forced out of their homes in order to expand the security borders around the Palali army camp and Jaffna airport.

The villagers were well aware of the nature of this particular meeting. The military were preparing for an offensive against the LTTE and the EPDP had been

assigned the task of ensuring the fishermen adhered to new limits on their activities. The navy wanted to clear the sea for its patrol boats and therefore for the fishermen to cut their fishing back even further.

When no one turned up at the appointed time, the local EPDP kingpin, N. Mathanarajah, chairman of the Kayts local council, went berserk. He dispatched his teams of armed thugs in pickup trucks to drag people to the meeting by force. If people refused they were pulled and shoved into the vehicles.

At the top of the EPDP list were members and supporters of the SEP who had been waging a campaign against the impositions of the military and its EPDP flunkies. A group of armed thugs turned up at the house of SEP member R. Sutharsan. When he refused to attend the meeting, they physically forced him and other family members to walk towards the meeting. Another SEP supporter was shot at as he ran to escape a violent physical assault by an EPDP gang.

The EPDP's hostility stems from the SEP's consistent defence of the rights of Tamils and its intransigent opposition to the racist war in the north and east of the country conducted both by the PA and previous United National Party (UNP) governments. At the same time, however, the SEP's struggle for a socialist perspective has also cut directly across the LTTE's perspective for a separate capitalist statelet. As a result SEP members have been subject to attacks both by the government and the state apparatus, and by the LTTE.

Sutharsan only returned to his native Kayts last June after being imprisoned for more two months by the LTTE in Killinochchi in the area to the south of the Jaffna peninsula. He and other SEP members were only released after a sustained international campaign on the *World Socialist Web Site* against the LTTE's attack on basic

democratic rights.

At the meeting, the local EPDP leader, dressed in the manner of a petty gangster with his sarong drawn up above his knees (as if preparing for a fight), singled out Sutharsan for special treatment. He was told that he had received his “first and last warning” if he did not stop engaging in political activity in the Kayts area. A second SEP supporter was told that his legs would be broken if he assisted Sutharsan and a third was warned that he would not be allowed to earn a living from fishing.

The council chairman was particularly concerned that the fishermen, with the SEP's assistance, had sent a complaint to the Human Rights Commission about the atrocities committed against local villagers by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the area. When the local EPDP leader failed to intimidate Sutharsan, he turned to the fishermen, bragged about his achievements in the area and then began to threaten them. He warned that he would cut their subsidies if they continued to support the fishermen's union formed by the SEP and ordered that its leadership be “changed forthwith”.

At the end of his diatribe, he told the fishermen not to fish before 6.30am (normally fishing starts at 2am) and not to fish in the naval areas. “That's why we called all of you here for this discussion. You have to abide by the orders of the military. No deviation will be tolerated,” he shouted. Limiting fishing to 6.30am to 11am—a lean time in the day—has a dramatic effect on poor families who are struggling to survive in the best of times.

The entire incident highlights the fact that the EPDP is little more than a gangster outfit. Its crude threats and thuggish intimidation of SEP members and local fishermen are not a sign of strength but of political weakness. Deeply compromised in the eyes of ordinary Tamils, the EPDP lacks any real political base and only exists because it has the official imprimatur of the PA government and the support of the military, which allows its members to openly strut around with guns.

Right from its formation the EPDP never represented the aspirations of ordinary working people. It was formed in 1989 following the breakdown of the Indo-Lanka Accord under which Indian troops had been dispatched to northern Sri Lanka to end the civil war and prop up the Sri Lankan state. But the Indian army increasingly came into conflict with the LTTE, and when it finally withdrew, its local allies in the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), who dominated the Provincial Council, faced a desperate situation.

The bulk of the EPRLF leaders fled the country to avoid

the wrath of the LTTE. The leader of the EPRLF's military wing Douglas Devananda split from the organisation, formed the EPDP and offered his services to the Colombo regime in the continuing war against the LTTE.

A measure of its local support is indicated by the results of the 1994 general election. Most of the more than 600,000 registered voters in the north observed an electoral boycott called by the LTTE and as a result the EPDP was able to win nine parliamentary seats—with the grand total of a few hundred votes. Despite the fact that it represented nobody, the EPDP's seats were crucial to ensure a stable parliamentary majority for the Peoples Alliance. In return for its support for the PA in parliament, the EPDP received cash and arms.

When the Sri Lankan army recaptured Jaffna in 1996, the EPDP moved back into the area and has enjoyed a privileged and protected position. It is, however, a precarious existence: local EPDP officials have no doubt been able to use their influence to feather their own nests but that will continue only insofar as they are effective in stamping out the opposition of Tamils to military rule over the area.

Any challenge to the EPDP's authority, no matter how limited, threatens to bring down the whole house of cards. After the SEP formed a union of fishermen in Kayts, the EPDP saw its grip start to slip as villagers gained in confidence and began to defy the EPDP's bullying and threats. So when no one turned up for his meeting, the local EPDP satrap reacted in the only way he knew how. He unleashed his armed goons.

The SEP leadership in Sri Lanka has vigorously protested against the EPDP's actions and demanded that its leader Douglas Devananda publicly repudiate the threats and rein in his thugs. Devananda has received the protest in writing but has made no reply so far.

The SEP holds Devananda and the EPDP leadership directly responsible for any harm that may come to any of its members or supporters in the Jaffna area and calls on workers, intellectuals, young people and others in Sri Lanka and internationally to issue a protest against this serious attack on basic democratic rights.



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