

Large-scale arrests of Tamils following bomb blast

Dianne Sturgess

17 June 2000

After the June 7 bomb attack in Sri Lanka that killed Industrial Development Minister Gunaratna and 22 others, the police launched a racist witch-hunt campaign against Tamils living in and around Colombo. Search operations have been conducted in the areas where Tamils live and scores of Tamil youth have been detained at various police stations in the city and suburbs.

Although the police had told the press that they had arrested 63 persons on suspicion of involvement in the blast, the figures collected by *World Socialist Web Site* correspondents are much higher. The bomb attack took place at Ratmalana, 16 kilometres south of Colombo, near a large housing scheme named "Zoysapura," where a few hundred Tamil families are also living.

Minutes after the blast thugs of the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and racist elements broke open shops owned by Tamils in the immediate vicinity of the incident. Most of the Tamil employees had already fled the scene, expecting a backlash. The few workers who remained behind closed doors were mercilessly attacked in front of the police. Later police, accompanied by thugs—including policemen in civilian clothes—started arresting youth in the housing project.

One Tamil resident, a female government employee, told the WSWS: "They [thugs] were shouting, saying 'Tigers are there in these houses,' showing flats where Tamils live. They were demanding to open the main gate. Police asked us to come down and open the gate. We did so in fear. If we did not open, they would have come in breaking the gate. Police searched all the flats occupied by Tamils. Where the occupants were not in, as some were out for work, the police forced open the doors, hitting them with rifle butts or shooting at locks."

She said there could have been 15 to 20 arrested from

the housing complex alone. "Most of them are engineering students at the University of Technology [in Moratuwa, few kilometres to the south of Ratmalana]. My nephew was taken into custody on his way from the university. He was taken to Mount Lavinia police and the police said he was to be sent to the Criminal Investigation Division for more questioning. But he has no connection with the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]. They are innocent boys."

In the same evening some soldiers were seen going round the housing complex with thugs armed with clubs.

About 69 University of Technology students have been taken into custody from the housing complex and university hostels. The police raided the university hostels in the middle of the day, while students were preparing for examinations. Racist elements among students supported the police, as did some officials of the engineering students union. A few racist students in the university are associated with a fascist group called the National Movement Against Terrorism—a breakaway group from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Some pro-PA student leaders also assisted the police raid. Before police arrived, a racist group supported by the student union leadership checked the national identity cards of Tamil students. One student, Pradeepan, appealed to student union leaders to intervene because of the impending final year exams. The racists replied: "Our country is more precious to us than you."

One student had been arrested five times earlier and released because police were unable to produce any evidence to show that he has been associated with the LTTE. The racists caught one student and handed him

over to university security guards. The police later seized him. The doors of three rooms belonging to Tamil students were forced open and searched while they were in police custody.

After interrogations the police released 19 students the next day and 36 on the following day. Five students, Pushpaharan, Prabaharan, Leela and Ramesh, all third year students, and Nazeer, a graduate student, were in lock-ups at the Moratuwa police station. Pushpaharan was the president of the university's Tamil literature association last year. Perimpanayagam, Senthil and Siyam Santharan are among nine students detained at Mount Lavinia police station. Police told their relatives they had been handed over to the Terrorist Investigation Division.

One of the released students told the WSWS: "Some Sinhala students showed us to the police. Police said some students demanded they come. There are also female students among the arrested. These people have given police the addresses of Tamil students staying outside the campus too. One brother and a sister were at a small rented house hoping to bring their family from Jaffna. They were also taken into custody.

"Of course some Sinhala students protected us. When the police tried to enter some hostels, they told the police that Tamil students were not there and prevented police entering the premises. Our exams are scheduled in the coming days, but how can we concentrate on studies when there is no peace of mind?"

University authorities initially inquired about the arrested students. Later, however, the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of the Engineering Faculty told the student union that they could do nothing but appeal for a speedy investigation. University authorities were forced to postpone the final year exams.

Apart from the students, other Tamils were arrested. Three days after the bomb blast the mass media reported that the police had been able to arrest LTTE hard-core members who supported the attack, quoting police sources. Under the headline "Bomb Brothers," one newspaper reported that two millionaire brothers had been arrested. But the next day another paper reported that the area's police chief denied the report. Later, houses of Tamils were subjected to a search operation in Dehiwela, an area just outside Colombo.

The government and the media have used the bomb attack to launch a major psychological campaign to

boost support for the war and to sow racial tensions in order to divert attention from the government's political crisis and the imposition of the war burden on ordinary people.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact