

# Sri Lankan authorities seize on minister's assassination to promote war against Tamils

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The Peoples Alliance (PA) government in Sri Lanka is seeking to exploit the June 7 terrorist killing of C.V. Gunaratne, a senior cabinet minister, to whip up an atmosphere of war fever and build popular support for its onslaught against the Tamil population in the north and east of the country.

Along with Gunaratne, the industrial development minister, 24 others were killed by a suicide bomber, believed to be a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which fights for a separate state in the majority-Tamil part of the island. Gunaratne was leading a "War Heroes Day" fundraising campaign in Colombo for the war against the LTTE when the bomb exploded.

The minister and his wife, who later succumbed to her injuries from the blast, were given a full state funeral on June 10. Their two bodies were brought to the parliament complex in the morning for the ceremony and then paraded through the streets of Colombo.

A June 11 editorial in the government-controlled *Sunday Observer* tried to incite religious sentiments among Catholics. "The LTTE could not have been unaware that by killing Minister Gunaratne they were removing one of the two Catholics in the Cabinet and the Minister who as the more senior of them was the Government's official link with the Catholic church."

In the aftermath of the bombing, the private media joined with the government-controlled press and broadcast outlets to intensify the pro-war propaganda campaign. The *Island*, well-known for its Sinhala chauvinist positions, argued that the war should be intensified.

Its June 9 editorial, entitled "How 'Unwinnable Wars' were Won," stated: "The reason why this 'war' is 'unwinnable' is because it has never been fought like a war that should be won. From the very beginning, there has been vacillation on the part of governments between war and negotiations. The military effort has been half-hearted."

The message was clear: the measures taken by the government, which include sweeping emergency powers to ban protests and strikes and put the whole country on a war

footing, are not sufficient. More drastic measures are needed. All talk of "peace" and "negotiations" should be stopped.

The effect of the war-mongering could be seen when racist thugs, openly backed by the police and the army, launched physical attacks on Tamils near the bomb blast site. Next, house-to-house search operations were conducted on Tamil homes in the "Zoysapura" housing scheme. More than 60 Tamils, including 55 students from the University of Technology in Moratuwa, a few kilometers away from the blast site, were arrested as suspects. Twelve are still in detention.

The media has been filled with articles hailing the assassinated minister for being "close to the common people," citing his conversations with people at Sunday fairs and such events. But the statements issued by various business chambers showed to whom he was really close.

According to the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce: "It was the Minister's in-depth knowledge of the private sector, gained during the time he served in it with distinction before entering politics, which enabled him to understand and deal with the many issues and problems, bringing about speedy solutions." The Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Sri Lanka lamented his death as a "great loss to the industrial sector of the country". The Sri Lanka Apparel Exporters Association praised him for creating "a conducive environment and the right conditions for our industry to function effectively without let or hindrance".

Gunaratne was a leading right-wing politician of Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main partner in the PA coalition. He was long known as a warmonger. The media emphasized that in 1997 he was the first politician to demand that the entire country be placed on a war footing.

Under the headline "The Death of a Hero," the *Island* lionized him: "CV [Gunaratne] died a hero. He was a politician who was deeply interested in the welfare of the soldiers at the front and was telling his fellow ministers that the so-called 'war' should be fought the way it should be

fought. Two years ago he called for the country to be placed on a 'war footing' and said so in parliament. When President Kumaratunga finally decided to do so, CV rang *The Island* to remind us that he had been an advocate of enforcing austerity while this conflict was going on."

An editorial in last weekend's *Sunday Times* entitled "War Heroes and Others" indicated how far the PA government has shifted to the right in relation to the war. "The late C.V. Gunaratne, who paid with his life on War Heroes' Day, made the call for placing the country on a war footing two years back," it stated. "But his voice was consumed by the deafening babble that emanated from the Sudu Nelum Movement and the Peace bandwagon. The government's rallying cry in fact was that those who talk of "wars" or "war footings" are racists and traitors. In the face of this deafening onslaught, even the stentorian voice of Mr. C.V. Gunaratne was forced into an unfamiliar silence."

According to the editorial, Gunaratne and others, in a minority in the PA two years ago, had gained the upper hand when President Chandrika Kumaratunga placed the country on war footing. She also declared June 7 to be War Heroes' Day. It was symbolic of the government's full shift, from promising peace when first elected in 1994, to resting on the most right-wing Sinhala chauvinist groups.

The announcement of War Heroes' Day was accompanied by a call for all workers to sacrifice two days wages per month to finance the war. The government urged the whole nation to observe a two-minute silence at 9.30 a.m. on June 7 to honour those who had fallen in fighting the 17-year civil war against the Tamils.

The government's other professed purpose in observing the day was to boost the morale of the armed forces. Its proclamation came as the army suffered major defeats on the Jaffna peninsula and recruitment was becoming more difficult. War Heroes' Day was an attempt to counter the growing opposition to the war, amid the curbing of democratic rights and the imposition of harsher economic burdens.

The Ministry of Public Administration issued a special circular to all ministries, departments and corporations ordering officials to get their respective workforces to participate in workplace functions on the day. The main ceremony was held at the Presidential Secretariat, presided over by Kumaratunga with ministers, military leaders and leading state bureaucrats in attendance. Gunaratne participated in this ceremony before joining the fundraising campaign.

Armed soldiers and police officers forced traffic to a halt on main roads at 9.30 a.m. But most people did not even bother to get down from their vehicles to observe the two minutes silence. It was reported that in some public transport

busses, people openly aired their opposition to the continuing war and denounced the PA regime.

Notwithstanding Gunaratne's war-mongering and reactionary politics, the June 7 terror bombing in no way advanced the struggle against the anti-Tamil war or took forward the defense of the rights of the Tamils, or any other section of the Sri Lankan population. On the contrary, such actions, killing ordinary citizens and spreading fear and panic, play into the hands of the PA and the most reactionary Sinhala chauvinist elements. These actions aid the war mongers in their most crucial task—dividing the Sri Lankan working class along ethnic and religious lines. At a point of extreme crisis for the regime and growing popular disillusionment with the war, such terror bombings can only sow confusion among the masses, to the political benefit of the government.

These terrorist tactics are bound up with the LTTE's program of Tamil national exclusiveness. While cutting across the struggle to unite the Sri Lankan masses against the war, they provide the authorities with new pretexts to intensify repression and deepen their assault on basic democratic rights. In this regard, the above-quoted *Sunday Observer* editorial was typical of the response of the pro-government media in its justification of the anti-Tamil crackdown that followed the bombing:

"Soon after last Wednesday's incident scores of Tamils, including some students of the Moratuwa University, were rounded up for questioning by investigators. The Authorities have no other option in such a situation."

The assassination of reactionary individuals such as Gunaratne does not change the character of the regime. More importantly, it does not contribute to, and, indeed, mitigates against the political clarification among working people—Sinhala and Tamil alike—that is essential to prepare the way for the overthrow of the entire ruling elite.



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