

As elections approach

# Sri Lankan government exploits allegations of murder and torture against opposition

**Sarath Kumara**  
**26 August 2000**

In the lead up to parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka in October, the arrest of former Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Douglas Peiris at Colombo airport on August 3, after four years in exile, has directly raised the issue of the murder and disappearance of thousands of rural youth in the country's south in the late 1980s by death squads linked to security forces.

The timing has prompted accusations by the opposition United National Party (UNP) that the Peoples Alliance government engineered Peiris' return in an attempt to discredit its opponents and implicate opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. Having recently failed to gain the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament for its proposed constitutional reforms, the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga is certainly desperate to gain seats in the upcoming poll.

The state-owned media reported that Peiris has already filed several affidavits in a case against him on murder charges arising out of his activities in the 1980s. In those affidavits he has alleged that Wickremesinghe provided premises for a torture chamber, had knowledge of extra-judicial killings, associated with those who killed activists of the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) and human right lawyers, and promised protection for the killers.

Peiris also implicated UNP general secretary Gamini Athukorale, the UNP leader's top advisor Milinda Moragoda, assistant UNP secretary Bodhi Ranasinghe and UNP financier and businessman M.H. Maharoff. He stated that they had helped him flee the country in 1996 by arranging a forged passport and providing financial aid.

Addressing the UNP parliamentary group on August 16, Wickremesinghe denied the allegations and charged

that the whole episode had been organised by the government. He said that a director of the country's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) had met Peiris at the Sri Lankan High Commission in the southern Indian city of Madras, towards the end of July, to arrange the police officer's return.

The police investigation into the involvement of top UNP leaders in torture and murder in the late 1980s is proceeding rapidly. The CID has already questioned Moragoda and Maharoff. The state-owned media reported that police have been unable to find and question Ranasinghe. According to his family, he has gone abroad.

The CID has arrested another UNP adviser, C.A. Chandraprema, who is still in police custody. Peiris has accused Chandraprema of being responsible for the murder of two human rights lawyers, Charitha Lankapura and Kanchana Abeypala, and two employees of the state-owned Tyre Corporation.

There is widespread speculation that the police may question and possibly even arrest Wickremesinghe. According to Peiris, Wickremesinghe asked the former SSP not to interfere with the killings carried out by Chandraprema and Dharmasiri, a former student leader later killed by the JVP. Such is the political sensitivity of the allegations that the magistrate appointed to hear the case has requested on personal grounds that she be replaced. The next hearing is set for September 26, just two weeks before the election.

Whatever the precise involvement of Wickremesinghe in the particular killings, there is no doubt that the previous UNP regime was responsible for widespread murders and disappearances during 1988-1990 in the south of the country. Having initially

collaborated with the Sinhala chauvinist JVP in attacks against workers, the UNP turned on its ally and then, under guise of suppressing a “JVP uprising,” instigated a far-reaching state-organised repression of rural youth.

Wickremesinghe was a senior UNP minister at that time. According to human rights organisations, pro-government death squads were involved in killing 60,000 people in the course of the terror campaign. A number of JVP activists as well as other government opponents were murdered at the notorious “Batalanda torture chamber” that operated in Peiris' area.

As a result of widespread outrage, the UNP government of President Wijetunga was forced in 1993 to begin excavation of mass graves of those killed. The PA leaders, then in opposition, exploited the anti-government hostility, promising to unearth all graves and prosecute those responsible for the murders.

After coming to power in 1994, the PA government appointed a commission to investigate the murders. It identified the torture camp but did not come to a conclusion as to those who committed the crimes, although it questioned Wickremesinghe. Peiris, who was accused of running the torture camp at Batalanda, slipped out of the country in 1996 as the investigations began.

The government's latest moves following Peiris' return do not flow from its genuine interest in investigating the crimes of the Sri Lankan state apparatus or prosecuting the murderers, many of whom have since shifted their political allegiance to the PA. It is cynically exploiting the issue in the run up to the election to undermine and possibly arrest senior UNP leaders and also to curry favour with the Sinhala chauvinist JVP, which the PA assisted back into the political mainstream after 1994.



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