

Tamil detainees hacked to death in Sri Lanka by organised racist mob

Our correspondents

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On Wednesday morning, an organised mob of Sinhala racists burst into a government detention centre for suspected members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at Bindunuwewa and attempted to hack to death all 41 young Tamil detainees. So far 28 are dead—24 were killed on the spot and another four have died of their injuries. Most of the remaining internees are in hospital in a critical condition under tight police guard. A few have been reported as missing. Bindunuwewa is near the town of Bandarawela, 210 kilometres from Colombo in the central hill region of the island.

According to local villagers, the several hundred thugs were armed with knives, swords, sticks and stones and arrived by vehicle at the camp. They not only killed the detainees but set fire to their bodies and to the buildings. We saw some of the gruesome results at the hospital in Bandarawela—severely burnt bodies and bodies with deep cuts to the head and neck. A hospital employee said he had seen headless bodies.

The Sinhala chauvinist press in Colombo have been quick to blame a protest by the Tamil detainees themselves for provoking local villagers into a spontaneous orgy of violence. Yesterday's lead story in the daily *Divaina*, entitled "Bindunuwewa village and Tigers [LTTE members] clash and 24 Tigers face death," alleged that the detainees had assaulted the chief officer and police officers, set fire to their uniforms and documents, grabbed their weapons and behaved in a riotous manner.

But the facts point in another direction. The brutal massacre has all the hallmarks of an organised operation involving Sinhala chauvinist groups acting with the active, or at least tacit, support of the Sri Lankan security forces.

All of the detainees had been held as "LTTE suspects" for lengthy periods without trial under the country's draconian security laws. Most were from the war-torn

north and east of the country; two were from central plantation districts.

At about 10pm on the previous night, a dispute broke out between the inmates and the officer in charge, Captain Abeyratne, over delays in their release. Abeyratne said on *Sirasa* TV that police officers on guard in the centre had fired into the air because the inmates had kept encircling him in "a threatening manner".

Following the protest, camp authorities called in police reinforcements from Bandarawela and soldiers from the nearby Diyatalawa army camp. There are conflicting reports as to whether the additional guards remained or were pulled out of the area at midnight. But whichever is the case, the ability of the mob to get into the detention centre with little or no resistance points to the connivance of the guards and possibly those in charge.

Local villagers, who had seen and heard the rampage, strongly denied attempts by the police and media to blame them for the massacre. "We villagers are farmers. We don't have vehicles. Those attackers had come in several vehicles," one villager told us. Another directly accused the police saying: "Now the police are trying to frame up innocent people, pretending that they themselves have no idea about the incident. The police could have prevented it."

Others expressed sympathy for the victims. A retired school vice principal said: "They were very good boys. I gave several lectures to them [in the camp]. They were helping the village by participating in *Shramadanas* (volunteer mass works) such as drawing water from tube wells for the villagers, etc." An old farmer added: "These youth were not harming anybody in the village. So, I don't think that our villagers attacked them. I can't believe it." A woman said: "These youth were innocent. They were doing good service for the village. We have not experienced any trouble from them even though the camp has been there for 15 years."

Another indication of the involvement of Sinhala extremist groups was the presence of racist anti-Tamil posters in both Bindunuwewa and Bandarawela specifically targetting the detainees. The slogans included: “Rehabilitation Tiger is a germ in the village, chase them away”, “Good water for the Tiger and muddy water for us” and “ *Panathipatha* [the Buddhist precept of refraining from killing] a farewell to you”.

There are eight villages near the camp: Aluthgama, Hapugasulpatha, Guru Viduhala, Maduvalpathana, Kandakumbura, Bindunuwewa, Badulugastenna and Dickulpathmulla. In the early hours of Thursday, police turned up, searched houses and ordered the villagers to report to the Bandarawela police station to make statements.

About 400 people, including women and children, who turned up at the police station were taken by bus to the army camp at Diyatalawa, a few kilometers away, then brought back to the station and kept waiting in the open without food for hours. The police insisted that about 50 of the villagers should voluntarily confess to being involved in the murders. But they angrily denied any involvement. The villagers were finally released just prior to a 5pm to 5am police curfew that has been clamped on the Bandarawela area.

The deputy chairman of the Bandarawela town council, Raghupathy, visited the camp and said that it looked like “a battlefield”. “This was not a spontaneous attack, it was well-orchestrated,” he commented. A number of Tamil parties, including the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), have condemned the murders.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga issued a statement saying that she was “deeply grieved” over the deaths and injuries and “unreservedly condemned this unfortunate incident”. She stated that “provocations from external forces had led to this situation” and added: “At no time were there any incidents among the detainees and the management. There were no incidents with the neighbors either.”

Which “external forces” the government is moving to blame became clearer from other official statements. Information and Media Minister Anura Yapa issued a media release announcing an official inquiry and speculating that the murders had been “maliciously planned” to embarrass the new Peoples Alliance government. He perversely claimed that “it is also natural that suspicions exist that the LTTE has been behind this”.

Army Commander General Lionel Balagalle was even

more explicit in comments to the Reuters news agency. “We are certain that interested parties were behind the incident,” he said, pointing the finger at “certain outsiders” who had visited the camp over the past three weeks to stir up trouble. Balagalle's comments are a crude attempt to blame the victims and those who defended them, implying that they deserved their fate for protesting over their lengthy detention.

Little mention has been made of the most likely organisers of the massacre—Sinhala extremist groups that have been responsible for anti-Tamil attacks in the past. In the recent Sri Lankan election, both the ruling Peoples Alliance and the opposition United National Party tailored their campaigns to appeal to these chauvinist layers. Like other official investigations, the inquiry into the latest massacre will be nothing more than a whitewash aimed at exonerating the government and the security forces.

The latest massacre is reminiscent of the killing of 53 Tamil political prisoners at Welikada jail in Colombo city in July, 1983 in the midst of the anti-Tamil riots that resulted in hundreds of deaths and set the country on the road to civil war. In December 1997, Sinhala prisoners egged on by jail guards and soldiers set upon Tamil political detainees at the Kalutara prison, 30kms south of Colombo, killing four and seriously wounding others.

Hundreds of Tamils have been arrested, tortured and detained without trial for months and years in detention centres and prisons as part of the systematic harassment and intimidation of the Tamil minority by security forces.

Bindunuwewa Rehabilitation Centre is just one of a number of government camps in which “LTTE suspects” are held and subject to compulsory brainwashing. Many of the “suspects” have no connection at all with the LTTE. Socialist Equality Party member Selliah Rajkumar was held for months at Bindunuwewa, denied access to party members and finally released after an extensive international campaign by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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