

After the murder of Tamil detainees

Sri Lankan police and army crack down on Tamil plantation workers

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Sri Lankan security forces, working alongside Sinhala extremist thugs, have imposed a general clampdown on protests by Tamil-speaking plantation workers in the central hills area of the island. The demonstrations and hartal [a combination of strikes and shop closures] were called following the brutal murder of Tamil detainees held at the Bindunuwewa detention camp on October 25 by a Sinhala mob.

A limited night-time curfew was declared under the country's emergency laws last Sunday in Kotagala, Watagoda, Hatton and Thalawakele and then extended on Monday to include daytime hours from 11 a.m. and to cover the entire Nuwara Eliya district—one of the main tea plantation areas.

Several hundred soldiers have been brought into the area along with riot police and plainclothes officers. On Sunday and Monday all road and rail transport in and out of the district was prohibited, except for police and army vehicles. Six Tamils have been killed by either police, soldiers or Sinhala gangs in what amounts to a virtual police siege throughout the district.

Last Sunday security forces shot and killed four Tamil youth and injured several others in separate incidents at Watagoda and Thalawakele. A father looking for his missing son was gunned down at Thalawakele on Monday morning by the security forces. On Tuesday, a plantation worker was beaten to death by a gang of thugs when he arrived to find them raping two young girls in his house in Watagoda.

Police have arrested opposition parliamentarian P. Chandrasekaran for allegedly inciting the demonstrations, and detained at least 25 other people. The government and security forces are acutely sensitive to any protest in the plantation districts, where some 300,000 Tamil-speaking workers live. Estate workers are among the most

oppressed layers of the Sri Lankan working class.

Similar hartals against the Bindunuwewa massacre were held in Vavuniya in the Northern Province and Trincomalee in the Eastern Province last week, but no incidents were reported. Tamil and Sinhala people joined together to condemn the murder of the detainees. But in the Nuwara Eliya district, the police worked with Sinhala goons to disrupt protests in the towns of Kotagala, Hatton and Thalawakele.

The provocations began last Friday, October 27, when local thugs tore down a banner condemning the Bindunuwewa murders erected at the market centre of City Plaza in Hatton. The following day Tamil workers and youth responded by decorating not only Hatton but the adjoining towns of Norwood, Maskeliya, Thalawakele, Watagoda and Samimale with black and white banners. Numbers swelled as news spread that the body of one of the Bindunuwewa detainees, Santhanan Selvaraja, was to arrive on Sunday for a funeral at nearby Kotagala.

In Hatton alone, around 100 people gathered at the Hatton bazaar early on Saturday to put up decorations and fix white flags to all the vehicles in the town. Most vehicle owners—both Sinhala and Tamil—drove away with the flags fixed as a mark of sympathy. By the evening more than 500 people had gathered and only left the town after a curfew was imposed from 8 p.m.

These activities enraged local Sinhala extremists who were given the run of the town by police overnight during curfew hours. Squads of goons roamed the area in buses cutting down the banners and decorations. Each bus carried one or two thugs on the roof who cut down the banners, while others armed with clubs travelled inside to beat off anyone who opposed them.

Following this blatant provocation, the plantation

workers throughout the district, who were already committed to strike on Sunday, decided to march in groups with banners to the funeral of Santhan Selvajaja at Kotagala. The banners included: “Stop the massacre of Tamils”, “We mourn for those killed at Bindunuwewa” and “Oppose the murderous government”.

But the marches were blocked by police and army personnel who ordered the protesters to turn back and return to their estates. After beginning to disperse, they were pelted with stones by thugs hiding in wayside buildings near the road. Those who managed to attend the funeral attempted to march to Thalawakele in a procession led by parliamentarian Chandrasekaran, but were also blocked.

Although a curfew had been declared from 1:30 p.m., workers and youth gathered in Thalawakele for a meeting called by Chandrasekaran, leader of the Up-country Peoples Front (UPF)—an organisation based on Tamil plantation workers. He finally spoke to about 3,000 people and called on the crowd to disperse.

As the meeting was breaking up, police fired at the crowd, killing two youths on the spot. The protesters were forced to run for cover. During the commotion, they damaged several Sinhalese shops and attacked some parked vehicles. Later Sinhala mobs retaliated, attacking Tamil-owned shops.

Chandrasekaran was arrested at his home in Thalawakele the following day and brought to Colombo for questioning by the Criminal Investigation Department. He has been accused of inciting people to demonstrate and to violence. No charges have been laid but he was still in detention as of Thursday. His lawyer told the press: “Unless they issue a detention order the arrest of Chandrasekaran becomes an unlawful arrest. But they cannot even issue a detention order because they have nothing to justify such an arrest.”

Workers from Nuwara Eliya, Kandapola, Ragala, Hatton, Thalawakele and other areas stopped work this week to demand the immediate release of the UPF leader. The UPF, however, issued a statement calling on them to end their strike action.

Chandrasekaran first entered parliament in 1994, joined the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and was appointed a junior minister. He broke from the government just before last December's presidential elections and formed an alliance with the opposition United National Party (UNP). He was re-elected under the UNP banner in the recent general elections.

Police and soldiers forcibly broke up demonstrations in

other towns. In Hatton on Sunday, Tamils were chased off the streets and Sinhala thugs allowed to roam at will. These goons ordered all Tamil shops to close on Monday, but following protests by shop owners the police allowed them to open for a limited period in the morning. In Ginigathhena, police took no action against Sinhala thugs who set fire to about 20 Tamil-owned shops on Monday.

At Watagoda, 16 kilometres from Hatton, a gang ransacked the regular mail train from Colombo when it arrived at the station on Sunday, setting four carriages on fire. Plantation workers living nearby heard the commotion and came to the aid of the mainly Sinhala passengers. They helped the 150 passengers to a nearby temple and brought them food. Armed police arrived on the scene, saw the Tamil workers near a group of Sinhala passengers and opened fire without warning. The passengers pleaded with them to stop, but two Tamil youth had already been killed by police gunfire.

None of the traditional left parties or the trade unions has condemned the attacks on plantation workers. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka are partners in the ruling coalition and hold ministerial posts. The main plantation workers union—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC)—is also in the PA government. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman, a cabinet minister, appealed to plantation workers to be calm, but made no protest against the police actions.

Both the government and the police have blamed the unrest in the plantation districts on agitators from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which the army is fighting in the North and East. Acting Deputy Inspector General of Central Province Padmasiri Liyanage told the *Island* newspaper that police were searching for a number of people in connection with the events at Thalawakele, adding that there were indications that a few LTTE suspects had infiltrated the area to arouse the people.

The accusations of LTTE infiltration are a crude attempt to cover up the close collaboration between the police, army and Sinhala extremists in breaking up protests by plantation workers who were legitimately outraged at the unprovoked murder of detainees at Bindunuwewa.



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