

Media lies and distortions exposed

WSWS investigates the Bindunewewa massacre in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
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On October 25, a Sinhala extremist mob invaded a government-run detention camp at Bindunewewa in Sri Lanka and attacked the unarmed Tamil youth who were inside. Twenty nine were killed—27 died on the spot after being shot or hacked to death, and two more died later from their wounds. Another 12 were injured, some critically.

The response of the Peoples Alliance (PA) government and the Colombo media to the massacre has been a mixture of lies and deliberate distortions, aimed at appealing to anti-Tamil chauvinism. The first press reports claimed that a crowd of local Sinhala villagers, incensed at a protest by detainees, had spontaneously invaded the centre and carried out the murders.

Further articles and editorials embellished the story with claims that the “hidden hand” of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was involved. Most of the detainees were “LTTE suspects” who had been held for lengthy periods without trial under the country's repressive Prevention of Terrorism Act.

According to an editorial in the government-controlled Daily News on October 30, “a hardcore LTTE cadre” inside the camp “incited the others to stage a mutiny” to deliberately provoke an attack. The purported motive: “Since all the detainees had voluntarily surrendered, the LTTE wanted to annihilate them as an act of revenge for deserting the terrorist organisation.”

No proof was offered for any of these conjectures. Local villagers have denied being involved, pointing out that many of the attackers arrived by vehicle.

The editorial's argument was a crude attempt to blame the victims for their own deaths. It was based on the assumption that the prisoners had no right to protest over being arbitrarily detained or over poor conditions in the centre.

The issue has now been all but buried, both by the government and the media. A much publicised “top level inquiry” on the attack has dragged on without any results. Some 16 policemen, including two inspectors, have been “arrested” and kept at a police station in Colombo. Five civilians have also been detained. But no one has been charged.

World Socialist Web Site correspondents working in Colombo, Bindunewewa and the nearby town of Bandarawela have pieced together the following account of what took place from witnesses, including wounded detainees, local sources and information gathered by independent lawyers, as well as the results of a preliminary magisterial inquiry and an interim report issued by the government-appointed Human Rights Commission (HRC).

Contrary to the picture being presented by the media and government spokesmen, all the evidence points to the conclusion that the massacre of young Tamil detainees at the Bindunewewa Rehabilitation camp on the morning of October 25 was pre-planned and carried out by a Sinhala racist

mob with the active involvement of the police and other security forces.

Even the interim report issued by the Human Rights Commission on November 1 was forced to conclude that the assault on the camp was not “an unpremeditated eruption of mob violence caused by the provocation of the inmates. It is more consistent with a premeditated and planned attack.”

Bindunewewa lies in the central hill district of Sri Lanka, near Bandarawela, 210 kilometres east of Colombo. The camp had been a training centre for rural development officers and then for home guards (a police auxiliary force). In the late 1980s, it was used to house Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) suspects during the United National Party government's reign of terror against Sinhalese youth in the late 1980s.

The camp is one of a number of detention centres and prisons across the country where mostly young Tamils are held for prolonged periods. The Bindunewewa camp was meant to be for the rehabilitation of “LTTE suspects” or LTTE members who had surrendered to the army, but many of the inmates had no connection with the LTTE.

The centre was run by the government's National Youth Council, supervised by a Presidential Task Force and coordinated by the Human Rights Commission. The officer-in-charge, Captain Y.P. Abeyratna, and his assistant, Lieutenant A. Abeyratna, were both from the army's volunteer force. The staff was small—a reserve police constable, two home guards, two security assistants and four civilian staff—and security was relatively low key. But the security officials were armed with T-56 automatic rifles and a shot gun.

Detainees were allowed at times to leave the camp. Two of those who escaped death were working at a local shop and hotel at the time. They had been “released” but were forced to remain at the camp because the government provided no means for them to return to their villages. We spoke to a number of villagers, a former detainee and one of the injured. All of them described relations with the local Sinhalese as cordial and even friendly. They dismissed malicious gossip, circulated in the Colombo media, that the tensions had arisen because detainees had harassed local girls.

Most of the inmates were from the north and east of the country where the army is continuing its 17-year war against the separatist LTTE. Two were Tamils from the towns of Maskeliya and Kotagala in the tea plantation district of Nuwara Eliya. The detainees were as young as 11 and had been kept in the camp for up to 15 months.

There are significant discrepancies over the number of detainees in the camp, which show, at best, a callous indifference to their lives and, at worst, an attempt to cover up the true death toll. The police report filed in the courts stated that the number of inmates at the time of the attack was 41—25 dead and 16 injured. The HRC found from its own records, however, that the figure should have been 46 and noted in its interim

report that the matter was being further investigated.

When we contacted the regional HRC coordinator Senaka Dissanayake on November 7, he said: "There are still some doubts about the number of detainees at the Bindunuwewa rehabilitation center at that moment." According to him, the camp official Abeyratne put the number of detainees at 40 and the local police chief at 41. But when HRC members visited the camp on October 27, two days after the massacre, they found another body—lifting the total to 42.

"According to our reports there should have been 46 detainees at that time. If anyone was to be released it should have been reported to my office in advance. They seem to be hiding a lot of things. We are still investigating these matters. We will see," the HRC co-ordinator told us.

Prior to the attack, the detainees had begun a campaign over their continued detention and the conditions in the camp. The main demand was that minors and elderly inmates should be released immediately and the release of the others expedited. The inmates wanted their letters posted and to be allowed to receive mail and phone calls from relatives. In some cases, detainees had found their letters in dustbins. They also wanted soap.

These demands had been made repeatedly before and not acted upon. When Captain Abeyratna said he could provide no solutions, the inmates demanded to speak with higher officials. On October 24 at the regular evening meeting at 6pm they asked Abeyratna again, argued with him and some stood around him. A police officer fired his gun into the air, provoking an angry response from the detainees. According to the HRC interim report, several fluorescent lights and the police post were damaged.

The police claim that the detainees turned violent, entered the store room and armed themselves with iron rods then proceeded to damage buildings, furniture and the police post, and set fire to documents. The media in turn seized on the police reports to claim the officer in charge had been taken hostage and to paint a picture of a riot in which the detainees took control of the camp.

These versions are deliberate fabrications aimed at justifying what subsequently took place and covering up for the actions of the police and camp officials. The HRC interim report pointed out: "In the account given by the police officers there was no suggestion that inmates had taken any of the officers on duty at the centre as hostage and were holding them."

As to the police claims, the report stated: "The store did not show any signs of forced entry; the doors were intact and did not have any visible signs of damage. The glass panes of some windows in the office and officers' quarters had been broken. There were a few charred pieces of paper and a small quantity of ash in the office that indicated that a few papers had been burned. At the same time we noted that articles such as the television, radio, refrigerator had not been damaged by the inmates."

The HRC concluded that what they had seen did not "lend credence" to the claims that "inmates had gone round smashing up buildings and causing extensive damage". A further claim by a police constable that the inmates had attacked and injured Lieutenant A. Abeyratna could not be verified—both the officer in charge and his assistant are in police custody in Colombo.

When we spoke to one of the injured detainees, he explained that, far from threatening the camp guards and officials, it was the detainees themselves who felt in danger: "On the 24th we telephoned the ICRC [International Red Cross] office in Batticaloa and told them the situation was becoming dangerous and there was a threat to our lives. We told them that they were responsible if anything happened to us," he said.

When we told him about press reports claiming that the inmates had rioted and tried to escape, he said: "If we wanted to escape it was easy as there was no proper security system."

After the confrontation at the meeting, the camp officials rang the Bandarawela police. A police party comprising 30 officers armed with

T-56 guns arrived at about 8pm. Later they were joined by another 39 police officers sent from other stations. A group of soldiers arrived from the Diyatalawa army base about 10km away.

Perhaps the most telling sign of what was going on inside the camp was the response of Captain Abeyratna. According to the police, he told them that he could look after the camp and asked them not to allow outsiders to come in. In response to the telephone call from the detainees, the ICRC had rung the local police who had told them: "The situation is under control."

A survivor told us that the detainees did not want armed police in the camp but had later agreed that Head Quarters Inspector (HQI) [the local police chief] could enter unarmed. They protested to him about the way in which the police officer had fired his weapon during the meeting. Outside, a crowd of about 200 or 300 gathered at the side of the ground of the nearby Education Faculty and pelted stones at the inmates. No action was taken either by the police or army, other than to persuade the crowd to withdraw.

"When the situation looked quiet we went to sleep," the survivor said. The army withdrew its contingent at about 1am and, according to police, some armed police remained outside the camp.

Others, however, were very active. Villagers told us that a petition had been circulated in the area a few weeks before the massacre calling on authorities to remove the camp from the area. During the night of October 24, a group of Sinhala extremists seized on the incident at the centre to organise a mob. They put up posters in Bandarawela and Bindunuwewa inciting locals to "Chase out the Tigers [LTTE] who have destroyed the country" and "Close down the LTTE rehabilitation camp". Certainly the police knew about the posters as some were put up under their noses right next to the camp.

A mob began to gather early in the morning. Some may have come from nearby villages. But locals told us that most people were brought in from outside by vehicle. Press reports claimed a crowd of 2,000 to 3,000 had gathered but the HRC stated that there was no evidence of such a sizeable mob and the figure was exaggerated.

The HQI told the HRC that he received a message at 6.45am from the police inspector on duty at the camp that a crowd was gathering. Neither the police nor the army did anything. The HQI received another message at 8.15am from the same inspector that people were entering the camp, and it was now on fire.

A gang of thugs armed with iron rods, knives, axes and clubs entered the camp and set about hacking the Tamil inmates to death. Some detainees had their heads smashed in. The mob set fire to the buildings. Survivors told us they saw some inmates thrown onto the fire. Captain Abeyratna did nothing to stop the thugs, leaving as soon as they entered.

The role of the police is clear. No reinforcements were sent after the first warning and no attempt was made to halt the thugs from entering the camp. A lawyer pointed out that there was no sign of forcible entry into the camp. The barbed wire fence was intact. When some of the inmates tried to escape from the thugs by running out of the camp, police shot at them.

One survivor we spoke to was in hospital with gunshot wounds. "About 50 of the police shot at us," he said. "They did not try to shoot at the mob. The mob was with the police. The police shot at my leg. I ran to a policeman and pleaded with him [to save me]. He threw me into a truck. My right leg was wounded. The bullet was removed at the national hospital." Another of the detainees lost two fingers due to the police shooting.

When the detainees tried to hide in the police trucks to save their lives, the mob attacked them in front of the police. The police, instead of protecting the helpless victims, assisted in the murders. No one knows how many detainees were killed by police bullets, as not all the bodies have been properly examined and some were burnt. Ten of the injured

were hospitalised at Diyatalawa army hospital and two at the National Hospital in Colombo. When we saw them, they were chained to their hospital beds like criminals.

The police, and later the army, took no action to arrest any of the thugs. Army Captain Charitha Dematampitiya arrived on the scene in the aftermath of the massacre. He told the magisterial inquiry that he saw a large crowd outside the camp along the road and a few injured on the road. Inside the centre, there were people armed with assorted weapons. At the request of the police HQI, the captain called on the crowd to disperse, which it did.

Asked whether he had attempted to arrest any of the culprits, Dematampitiya claimed he had no powers to arrest civilians. He also said that the police had not tried to arrest anyone. It should be pointed out that the army routinely detains people and hands them over to the police. After the event, police officers rounded up several hundred local villagers, including women and children, for “questioning”. Far from seeking to probe the murders, the police called for 50 volunteers to “confess” in order to sweep the massacre under the carpet and whitewash their own role.

No organisation has claimed responsibility for the massacre, but several Sinhala extremist organisations have been active in the area. Sinhala Veera Vidahana (Sinhala Heroes Forum), one of the organisations that formed the chauvinist Sihala Urumaya Party (SUP), began agitation last year. The SUP contested the district in the country's parliamentary elections last month and some of its candidates live in the villages adjoining the Bindunuwewa camp.

The SUP denies organising the murders but there is no doubt that their anti-Tamil chauvinism during the election campaign helped create the climate for the attack to be carried out. Organisations such as the SUP have close links with the security forces, which are themselves deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism. When we asked Lalith Hettiarachchi, the SUP candidate for the Badulla district, point blank whether he had been involved, he responded, “I did not participate in it. But the job was done well.”

Who exactly organised the massacre remains unknown. But it was clearly aimed at further inflaming racist sentiment just two weeks after the parliamentary elections and in the midst of a highly unstable political situation. Sinhala thugs from the area, actively assisted by police on the spot, carried the murders out. Some of the police, two camp officials and a few locals have been detained and may even eventually be charged.

But many questions remain about the role of those further up the police and army chain of command. Which higher authorities did the local police chief tell about the incidents the night before the massacre? Why were troops and police withdrawn from the camp that night even though there had been a menacing crowd? Why did the local police chief do nothing when he heard that a mob was gathering outside the centre in the morning?

It is highly unlikely that any of the official inquiries will provide answers.



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