

Gangs, soldiers and politicians

Bomb blasts claim 11 lives at Sri Lankan concert

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A bomb attack at a large concert gathering in Sri Lanka in the early hours of April 1 has highlighted the increasingly widespread activities of gangs of thugs. Many of them are made up of ex-soldiers or deserters, who have links to the military, police and political figures.

At least 11 people were killed and nearly 200 injured after hand grenades were flung into the crowd, estimated at between 75,000 and 100,000, which had gathered to hear popular Indian singers. The concert at Kurunegala, 75km northeast of Colombo, was organised by the private radio and television channel, *Shree FM — Swarnavahini*. Most of the dead and wounded were innocent spectators.

According to eyewitnesses, a clash took place at the concert between rival criminal gangs from two villages. During the melee, a gang member threw one or two hand grenades into a section of the crowd dancing near a fruit drink stall and set off a huge fire. Many of the injured had serious burns.

Those trying to help the victims later complained to the media that police had assaulted concertgoers trying to flee the fire and those involved in rescue work. In order to deflect attention from their own role and the activities of the gangs, police officials attempted to blame the concert and its organisers. The following day the Inspector General of Police Lucky Kodituwakku announced that in future, all concerts would have to close by 11pm—a time later modified by the government to 1am.

Everything points to the involvement of serving or former soldiers. According to local police, the grenade used was a “JR-type” used by the Sri Lankan army. It had been brought to the concert by an ex-member of the

Special Task Force, an elite commando unit. Police also claimed that another soldier was involved. An eyewitness, Sisira Kumara, a soldier on leave, said that gang members were “tall and heavily built men” indicating they were not ordinary villagers.

The activities of gangs of thugs are a consequence of Sri Lanka's 18-year civil war against the Tamil minority and the militarisation of all aspects of life. While most citizens are subject to roadblocks, identity checks and, in the case of Tamils, arbitrary detention, soldiers and police have a free hand. Not only do they have access to weapons as well as the necessary training but also, in the name of “fighting terrorism,” the security forces enjoy virtual immunity in relation to crimes against ordinary people.

H.M.G.B. Kotakadeniya, Deputy Inspector General of Police on Crimes Intelligence and Organised Crime, complained in the *Weekend Express* of the “indiscriminate issue of arms and ammunition to politicians and their body guards... These weapons subsequently found their way into the hands of criminals to use them for their nefarious activities very effectively.” He also noted: “It had been found that there are more than 40,000 army deserters in this country of which more than half are youngsters who have modern training in the use of firearms and combat manoeuvres.”

Politicians, particularly on the government side, use some of these gangs as private armies with the tacit support of the security forces to harass and intimidate their political opponents. If the police or an army official attempts to take action, the particular politician swiftly intervenes to protect his or her mercenaries and to punish those who moved against them.

During the provincial council elections in early 1999 and the general election last October, the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) was notorious for its use of thugs. More than 600 cases of election-related violence, mostly by PA politicians, were reported in the 1999 poll for the North-Western Province. Kurunegala, the site of a recent bomb blast, is the provincial capital.

In last year's general election, D.M. Dasanayake, a leading PA politician in the same province, was accused of touring polling stations accompanied by a large gang armed with automatic weapons. At each stop his thugs would get out of their convoy of vehicles, chase away opposition representatives and intimidate election officials into allowing him to rig the ballot.

On April 3, the Supreme Court ruled that the rights of voters had been infringed in the ballot for the Central Provincial Council in April 1999. The court stated: "It was clear on a balance of probability that ballot-stuffing took place at 12 polling stations; that at 11 other polling stations there were incidents of harassment and chasing away of UNP [United National Party] polling agents by means of violence or threats of violence; and some of the respondents, including PA members, were involved in four incidents."

The opposition UNP used the same methods when it held power prior to 1994 and still retains its own groups of thugs. During the general elections last year, two PA supporters were killed in a clash between government and opposition gangs at Hunnasgiriya in Central Province. In a separate incident at Madampe in North Western Province, a UNP thug shot and injured two PA campaigners after an argument erupted.

Periodically evidence emerges of the involvement of these gangs in criminal activities. Recently the son of the Deputy Minister of Buddha Sasana (Buddhist Establishment) was arrested and held in custody for his alleged involvement, along with his father's bodyguards, in a gold smuggling racket.

These thugs for hire are also used to intimidate and attack workers. On February 12, local PA politicians used a gang of thugs as well as police transport scabs to break a strike by workers at the Daintee sweet factory in Ratmalana, south of Colombo. One worker was severely beaten and hospitalised. According to workers, relatives of the Minister for Ports and Southern Development Ronnie de Mel hold shares in the factory.

The latest bomb blasts at the Kurunegala concert

reveal that these gangs, as well as being completely indifferent to the loss of innocent lives, are becoming more open and brazen in their activities.



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