Sri Lankan director speaks to WSWS about chauvinist attack on film

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Sri Lankan film director, Mahakanumulle Vajira, about the campaign by rightwing Sinhala extremists to prevent him completing his latest film *Asampurna Kathawak* (An Unfinished Story). Thugs belonging to Sihala Urumaya (SU) disrupted production in April and have put the director under pressure since to abandon the film completely.

The SU, which has members on the Colombo University student council, mobilised a group of more than 250 to invade a university student hostel where the production was being filmed. They harassed the director and crew for two hours before forcing them to abandon the shoot. Vajira, who is a Buddhist priest and a resident of the university hostel, was forced out of the building, leaving behind his books, stationary and other personal belongings.

SU members claimed that filmmaking was "unbecoming" of a Buddhist priest. But the real reason for the attack is Vajira's well-known opposition to racism and the content of the film which deals with the impact of Sinhala chauvinism on a Tamil student.

Asampurna Kathawak explores the problems encountered by a Tamil student from Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka attending Colombo University. The youth, who is still in shock from the recent murder of his parents and younger sister by the LTTE, is a victim of ethnic discrimination and constant accusations by Sinhala chauvinists that he is a LTTE member. The isolated student becomes increasingly disoriented and insecure. The only living thing he can relate to at the hostel is a small kitten.

At one point during the incident at Colombo University, one of the protestors snatched the screenplay from Vajira, read it aloud and accused him of being a tool of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). SU supporters also claimed that the film discredited the university and slandered Sinhalese students.

The unprovoked attack on Vajira and his film crew was not just the product of a group of rightwing Colombo University students but has been orchestrated by the top leadership of the SU. Since the incident Vajira has been subjected to death threats and demands have been made that he hand over footage already shot. Buddhist high priests, acting in concert with the SU, have prevented him seeking refuge in Buddhist hostels and institutions.

Vajira, who is also a painter, poet and lyricist, has previously come into conflict with the Sinhala Buddhist hierarchy over his artistic work. The Peoples Alliance government has also banned one of his songs from state radio broadcasts. The song, which calls for freedom of artistic expression, is about Taslima Nasrin, the exiled Bangladeshi writer whose award-winning book has been banned in Bangladesh and in Sri Lanka. Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh have issued a fatwah or death sentence against Nasrin.

While Vajira has publicly declared his determination to press ahead with his film, *YA TV*, the private media group financing *Asampurna Kathawak*, has said that it may have difficulty providing funds for its continued production.

Vajira told the *WSWS* last month that violent disruption of his film had been pre-planned: "I've had to face threats and other humiliations on several earlier occasions because I kept myself distant from, and had been critical of, other Buddhist priests and the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinistic student organisations during my student years at Colombo University. The SU is a fascist movement and they always kept an eye on my activities in arts field and were following me.

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"It was organised for Vijayan, the Tamil youth who plays the leading role in the film, to live in a hostel room where the initial shootings were to be done for two days before the filming was due to start. Vijayan is not a student of Colombo University and it was necessary for him to familiarise himself with the university environment. During this time he was intimidated by SU supporters who called him 'Demala' (a degrading Sinhalese term for Tamils), jeered at and threatened. Vijayan, who was living alone in the room, didn't inform me about those things fearing that it would disrupt filming."

Vajira said aspects of his film were based on incidents that had occurred at the university during early 1990s. At that time, he said, the Colombo University Student Council was lead by the *Jathika Chinthana* (National Ideology) group, whose stated aim was to reassert Sinhala-Buddhist domination over all aspects of cultural life in Sri Lanka.

"Under the conditions of the communalist war, the most miserable consequence of capitalist politics in Sri Lanka, a Tamil youth faces insecurity not only in the South but in the whole country. Tamil youths are regularly arrested, tortured and murdered by government armed forces and police. What my film reveals is how the chauvinists operate in the civil society, collaborating with state terrorism against Tamil people—to victimise Tamil students and drive them into a state of insecurity alleging them all to be LTTE members."

Commenting on claims that a Buddhist priest should not direct film, he said: "I was ordained as a 'Samanera' (a new recruit to the Buddhist clergy) by my parents in my tender years, but over time I realised through reading and experience that my childhood conception of the liberty in the priesthood was a myth. I still have a belief in Buddhist philosophy but I reject the highhanded Buddhist clergydom, the main prop of backward cultural traditions and its domination. I've already written a screenplay about the contemporary priesthood, which is engaged in amassing wealth while shedding crocodile tears about human suffering. Although I still wear robes I do not consider myself under obligation to any Buddhist authority that claims the cinema medium is unsuitable for me."

The attack on Vajira's film is not an isolated incident but follows the PA government's ban of *Purahanda Kaluwara* (Death on Full Moon Day), Prasanna Vithanage's award-winning film depicting the impact of the 18-year civil war on a blind Sinhala peasant and his family. Artists, intellectuals and workers throughout Sri Lanka must defend Vajira's right to complete his film and take a stand against the growing number of assaults on freedom of artistic expression and democratic rights in Sri Lanka.

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