

Protests in Sri Lanka against the rape and torture of Tamil women

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Thousands of Tamils took part in a protest campaign throughout Sri Lanka last Friday to oppose the brutal treatment of Tamil women by members of the country's security forces. The protests focused on the recent rape of a young mother at a security checkpoint in central Colombo, which highlights the growing incidence of sexual harassment of Tamil women.

Shops, offices and schools closed and transport halted in the war-torn northern areas and in some parts of the East. In the centre of Colombo, shops owned by Tamils were closed on Friday morning. In the evening several hundred people picketed in front of the main railway station, shouting: "Stop harassing Tamil women," "Punish the culprits," and "Give us justice". In the plantation areas of the country's central hill districts, many Tamil-speaking estate workers stopped work to support the campaign. On some estates, non-attendance was as high as 60 percent.

The incident that provoked the protest took place on June 24. Police and soldiers had stopped a young Tamil woman the previous night at a security checkpoint at Maradana in central Colombo as she was returning home from work with her husband. The police took down her address and then visited her the following day on the pretext of questioning her over any connections to the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). She was taken to a lonely spot near the checkpoint and raped by six policeman and soldiers. They have since been arrested.

Last week's campaign follows protests earlier in the year over a spate of incidents.

* On March 28, Yogalingam Vijitha was granted leave in the Supreme Court to proceed with a fundamental rights petition over her detention and torture at the Negombo police station, just north of Colombo. The 27-year-old Vijitha was arrested in

Trincomalee on June 21 last year and taken to Negombo where she was accused of being an LTTE suicide bomber. On June 26 she was handed over the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) in Colombo before being remanded on September 20 to the Negombo prison.

Vijitha has provided graphic details of the torture used by the police and TID personnel. She had her face covered with a shopping bag containing chilli powder mixed in petrol, was beaten with wires and a pole, had paper pins driven under her finger and toenails, and had a plantain flower covered in chilli inserted into her vagina. She alleges police forced her to write and sign a confession admitting to being an LTTE member.

The young woman told her story to an assistant judiciary medical officer last September when she was admitted to the Colombo National Hospital for medical treatment. She has accused the police of acting on a false complaint made by a personal friend of one of the Negombo officers. Her petition cites eight people including senior officers at the Negombo police station and the TID. She also alleges that government-appointed human rights bodies took little action on her complaints.

Vijitha was only released from jail after her case received widespread publicity, forcing President Chandrika Kumaratunga to order the withdrawal of charges against her.

* In April, thousands of people took part in protests in Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka and Mannar over the rape and torture of two Tamil women—Sivamani Weerakoon, 24, and Nanthakumar Wijikala, 22. They were detained along with Wijikala's husband and Sivamani's six-year-old son on March 10 by a group of armed navy personnel during a raid on a private lodge in Mannar.

The two were taken by van to the Counter Subversive Unit (CSU) in Mannar, tortured and sexually assaulted. They were forced to sign “confessions” prepared in Sinhala—a language neither understands—admitting to being LTTE members and carrying bombs. Sivamani and Wijikala were released on bail on April 9 by a Mannar district judge who ordered restrictions on their movements.

After inquiries by the Amnesty International and UN Human Rights Commission, President Kumaratunga was compelled to appoint a special investigation team. On April 9, a judge directed police to detain the suspects and hold an identification parade. Both women identified 12 police and two naval personnel involved in the alleged torture and rape.

There are a number of indications that Sinhala extremists intend to seize on the case to whip up anti-Tamil sentiment. The lawyer defending the naval and police officers is S.L. Gunasekera, the leader of Sinhala Jathika Sangamaya, a breakaway from the chauvinist party Sihala Urumaya.

A crude attempt has already been made to discredit the women. A former senior CSU officer, N.P.N. Suraweera, has filed a counter case in the Appeal Courts in Colombo, alleging that the Roman Catholic bishop of Mannar, Joseph Rayappu, encouraged the two women to make their allegations public. The officer accused the bishop of having “close links with the LTTE”. A lawyer for the two victims has pointed out, however, that the women’s account has been supported by the report of a District Medical Officer who examined them and confirmed both had been tortured and sexually assaulted.

* Another case involving the rape of two Tamil girls by police in May has also emerged. The two were staying in a lodge at Bambalapitiya in Colombo and are still in police custody. One of the victims filed a fundamental rights case last week alleging police officers sexually assaulted her. She is alleging that the police forced her to sign a document in Sinhala, which she cannot read, and is demanding her place of detention be changed.

Previously the Peoples Alliance (PA) government has dismissed allegations of torture and rape as “aberrations” carried out by a handful of “bad elements” in the security forces. But the latest accusations have received comparatively extensive and

sympathetic media coverage, indicating a concern in ruling circles over the impact internationally of the publicity surrounding the cases.

An article in the *Daily Mirror* earlier in the year entitled “Wolves in sheep’s clothing” noted: “Doubly distressing is the horrendous claim by local right activists that more than 200 women, the majority of them minority Tamils had been raped by police and armed forces personnel over the last three year period or so.” The article commented with uncharacteristic concern: “Tamils, in similarity to all citizens, have equal rights and are entitled to protection of the law. But for the last decade or so, simply being a Tamil in Sri Lanka is seen as a crime.”

Likewise a number of Tamil parties, which previously have limited themselves to mild protest notes, have also been compelled to respond to the growing anger at the treatment of Tamils. Under conditions where the government has lost its majority in parliament and faces a deep political crisis, not only opposition parties such as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) but also the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), part of the ruling coalition, have supported the latest demonstrations.

All these parties are currently involved in making deals with the PA government or the opposition United National Party (UNP) in the lead up to a no-confidence motion later in the month. But the PA and UNP are responsible for carrying out the protracted and brutal war against the LTTE, of imposing anti-democratic measures that give extraordinary powers to the police and military, and of whipping up an atmosphere of anti-Tamil racism. That is, they are responsible for creating the conditions in which the rape and torture of Tamil women take place.



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