Sri Lankan police kill three at fishermen's protest

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Three people were killed when Sri Lankan police opened fire on demonstrating fishermen near Colombo on November 20. The fishermen were protesting against the destruction of their livelihood in Uswatakeyyava village, 10 kilometres north of the capital.

Among those killed was P.D. Marcus, the president of the local fishermen's union. The other victims were Siriyalatha, a local woman, and Sunil, a three-wheeler driver who had been sleeping nearby. He died when a bullet penetrated the wooden planks of his hut. Twelve people were severely injured.

Eyewitnesses told the *World Socialist Web Site* that members of the Special Task Force, a special operations unit normally used against armed insurgents, had started shooting indiscriminately with T56 rifles, without any warning. More than 300 regular policemen also combed the area.

Members and supporters of the St. Anthony's Fishermens Union had gathered in front of the local office of Kiangnam, a Korean company, demanding compensation for the impact of the large-scale excavation of sand from the local beach. Kiangnam and Boskalis, a Dutch company, removed the sand for the construction of the Colombo-Katunatyake highway.

Following the shooting, a section of the crowd set fire to a company bus used by the policemen. The next day, some 3,000 people joined a demonstration organised by the local Catholic church, demanding that the police responsible be arrested and tried.

The shootings took place amid a massive police operation involving 40,000 officers for next week's general election. Nominally the police mobilisation is aimed at suppressing election-related violence. But the ruthless suppression of the fishermen's protest points to the underlying purpose: to prevent any expression of the sharp tensions produced by growing levels of poverty and unemployment.

The Peoples Alliance (PA) government is building an expressway from the Katunatyake free trade zone to Colombo harbour, financed by World Bank loans. Despite a previous pledge by the state highways department and the two companies, Kiangnam and Boskalis, no compensation has been paid to the local fishermen whose livelihood has been disrupted by the operation.

Immediately after the killing, Highways Minister A.H.M. Fawsie was quoted in the press defending the shooting, accusing demonstrators for "taking law into their hands".

Fawsie told the media that one million rupees had been allocated for compensation. Yet the residents have not received a cent. They have demanded that each fishing boat owner be paid 1,000 rupees ($US9) a day and each displaced fishermen 500 rupees a day. On November 19, the company and the department declared that they would pay only 7,000 rupees a month for a boat and 30 rupees a day for individual fishermen. The demonstration was organised in protest against this decision.

The removal of sand has disrupted fishing activity for more than six months—destroying fishing gear, including broad nets, driving out fish and killing fish spawn—and extensively damaged the environment along a 6km beach from Uswatakeyyava to Palliyawattta. It will be two years before conditions for coastal fishing are partially restored. The government has suppressed a report on the damage by the NARA, a state-run institute studying environmental effects.

Local residents are also affected by the operations of oil giant Shell, which pumps gas and petroleum to storage tanks in nearby Muthujurajawela from 4km

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offshore, violating an agreement with the government not to pump from less than 9km.

Both the government and privately-owned media have maintained a general silence about the police attack. The opposition United National Party (UNP) is trying to gain election mileage from the events, while the PA has denied any responsibility and accused the UNP of instigating the clash to discredit the government. Both parties have histories of using police brutality against working people.

Fishermen are among the poorest people in Sri Lanka. Fishing activity is drastically restricted—sometimes banned outright—along the northern and eastern coasts and parts of the western and north-western coasts, under security declarations issued as part of the ongoing war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The *WSWS* found the people of the Uswatakeyyava area shocked and angered by the police attack. All three people killed had young families. Marcus and Sunil had two children each; Siriyalatha had one. Sandun, a 17-year-old student—a passer-by—was also injured in the shooting.

Anil Wasantha, a fisherman with two children, said: "I have worked for 15 years but I have no savings. Rather I owe a big sum. This sand operation has hit us badly. Six times a day, two ships come for the sand. They have destroyed our nets and many other things. We get no compensation either. Life has become impossible. The police shooting came on top of that. We demand that those who fired the shots be punished. But what is the guarantee that we will be compensated?"

Nimal Ranjit, another fisherman, said: "I have a family of four children. The elder two are married without employment. I would get 300-400 rupees on a good day. But very often I go without a catch. During the south-west monsoon nothing can be done. It is impossible to get any other job. All my wife's jewels are pawned. I am deep in debt."

K. Albert, who has two children, said: "My meagre income is not sufficient to meet the rapidly increasing cost of living. The cost of equipment and the fuel for the boat are skyrocketing. Although the media talk of state aid being allocated, I have received nothing. Banks impose prohibitive conditions for loans. The state-run Peoples Bank has stopped giving loans to fisher folk altogether. They think it is too risky because we are the people that undergo the biggest hazards. We have only our mutual aid societies to help us."

Chamara Harsha, a student, said: "I did not participate in the previous demonstration. But I joined the one against the police attack. It was savage. This is utter injustice."

Mary, the wife of a fisherman, said: "The fishing is random. Women have no jobs. The previous UNP government did not even give us the Samurdhi (a small subsidy granted to the poorest families). They said our income was above 3,000 rupees a month. I do not know on what basis they calculate. Even if we get that, how can a family of five survive with the present sky-rocketing cost of living? Our children receive no proper education. All the schools in the area have classes only up to GCE Ordinary level. The schools with advanced level classes are far away. Even the schools we have are without proper equipment. Now the government is asking us to maintain the schools too."

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