Police raid exposes a secret Sri Lankan army assassination squad

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A police raid on an army "safe house" in Colombo on January 2 has provided a revealing glimpse into the dirty operations of the Sri Lankan military. The luxury home situated in the Millennium City housing complex on the outskirts of the capital was the base for a secret army hit squad ostensibly to carry out attacks behind the lines on the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Police acting on a tip off arrested an army captain, four soldiers and a former LTTE member and seized a large cache of sophisticated weapons. These included 10 anti-personnel mines, 20 land mines, four light anti-tank weapons, automatic rifles and ammunition, LTTE uniforms, explosives and related material, and thermobaric weapons.

The unit, which was officially part of the army's Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP), operated under the auspices of the Directorate of Military Intelligence. Details of its function, whereabouts and operations were known only to a handful of top-level army officers. The revelation of its existence has provoked outrage from the military and its apologists who have accused the police of compromising a top state secret.

Although the military police were involved in the raid on the safe house, the military hierarchy, including the army commander Lionel Balagalla, were apparently not informed. Balagalla immediately contacted the Inspector General of Police (IGP) to prevent those arrested from being interrogated and to obtain their release.

However, the army's attempt at damage control was blocked by Internal Security Minister John Amarathunge. The soldiers were held at a police station under the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) which provides broad powers of detention without trial. They were only finally released on January 13, after Balagalla issued a public statement declaring that the unit had not been engaged in political assassinations but were used in covert operations as part of the long-running war against the separatist LTTE.

Balagalla's statement was aimed at quelling widespread media speculation that the military squad had been connected to President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her Peoples Alliance (PA) which was defeated in national elections in December. It was even suggested that the unit was set up by army officers sympathetic to the PA to assassinate the newly elected Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The very fact that the army chief was compelled to officially deny that his troops are involved in political violence in Colombo speaks volumes. The recent election was one of the most violent on record with 2,247 incidents officially reported, including 46 deaths. Both the PA and the United National Party (UNP) routinely use gangs of thugs to intimidate and terrorise their opponents and also have close connections to the military and police top brass. In the course of the campaign, UNP leader Wickremesinghe claimed to have information about plans by a group of soldiers to murder him using thermobaric weapons.

The UNP government appears to have accepted Balagalla's explanation. Indeed the newly appointed Defence Minister Tilak Marapana ordered the release of all members of the unit, except the ex-LTTE fighter, and expressed his anger over the police raid. A media campaign is underway to defend the unit and criticise the police for exposing its operations.

Defence analyst Iqbal Athas, for instance, who has close connections to the military hierarchy, has written several lengthy comments in the English language *Sunday Times* criticising the police involved in the raid. In the latest article entitled "The great betrayal," he berated the "blind fanatics of the [police] department" for the "humiliating ordeal" suffered by "the national heroes" and called for a public apology to the army and the soldiers.

It should be pointed out that the treatment of these soldiers during their short stay in police custody was comparatively mild compared to the abuse and torture routinely meted out to hundreds of Tamils who are held without trial as "LTTE suspects" for months and years under the country's draconian anti-terrorist legislation. All of this is defended as absolutely essential to national security by Athas and others of his ilk.

Despite the attempts to sweep the matter under the carpet, a number of serious questions about this covert unit remain unanswered.

No one in the political establishment—either the government or opposition—has questioned the legitimacy of the military maintaining a secret assassination squad. Athas reveals, with pride, that one of the squad's "most prized accomplishments" was the murder of LTTE military intelligence leader Thambirasa Kuhasanathan. Sri Lankan politicians regularly

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brand the LTTE as “terrorists” yet the army retains the services of a group of professional assassins.

The LTTE’s *Tamil Net* website provided an extensive report on January 8 that confirmed that the army’s LRRP units had killed Thambirasa Kulashanthan, as well as Colonel Shanker, a close confident of LTTE leader Prabhakaran. It accused the army of two abortive attempts on the life of Thamil Chelvam, the leader of its political wing.

The LTTE also alleged that the LRRP units were involved in a series of attacks on civilians living in LTTE-controlled areas: the kidnapping of two civilians last April 2, the seizure of six farmers including three women on April 25, the gunning down of two people in May at Batticaloa North, and the disappearance of another three near Mathurankerny.

The army claims that its hit squads only operate behind enemy lines but the manner in which those arrested operated raises doubts. Why were they living in a “safe house” with a huge cache of weapons rather than in military barracks? Why were their activities known only to a handful of top officers in the Directorate of Military intelligence?

While no official explanation has been forthcoming, the army’s apologist Athas offers a series of excuses that raise more questions than they answer. He writes: “A plethora of them [safe houses] existed under the police and security forces when they combated the violence of the then outlawed Janatha Vikukthi Permuna (JVP) in the late 1980s. Suspected were arrested and grilled at these safe houses not to mention the complaints it drew from human rights groups of torture. In the later years, major state intelligence agencies had their safe houses to detain and question Tiger guerrilla suspects.”

In other words, the use of “safe houses” by the military special squads is a longstanding practice, not only in the war against the LTTE but also against political opposition in the south. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the security forces targetted the chauvinist JVP as part of a far broader operation to intimidate and terrorise layers of discontented rural youth in the south. An estimated 60,000 rural youth were brutally killed or simply “disappeared” during the period.

Significantly, the JVP, has since made peace with the political establishment in Colombo. The party, which falsely claims to be Marxist, is among the most extreme advocates of the war against the LTTE and denying basic democratic rights to the Tamil minority. In response to the revelations about the safe house, the JVP has been one of the loudest in the defence of the army and its use of military assassination squads that a decade ago were used against JVP supporters and rural youth.

Covert military and paramilitary units such as the Black Cats and Green Tigers were engaged in wholesale torture and murders. The infamous Batalanda torture camp was one such safe house where high-level interrogations took place. The same compound housed leading members of the then UNP government, including the current prime minister Wickremesinghe.

Wickremesinghe may not have been a target of the arrested LRRP unit but one feature of the case points to a possible connection to other election-related violence. It is not entirely clear how the police came to know of the “safe house”. Athas points out that the unit had only taken up residence in mid-December and its existence was only known to select officers in the Directorate of Military Intelligence. He claims that the information was leaked by dissident members of the directorate but fails to answer the obvious question—why? At the very least, such divisions point to bitter feuding, possibly political, in the ranks of military.

The police superintendent in charge of the raid, Kulasiri Udugampola, came to know of the safe house through an apparently unrelated investigation. He was in charge of investigating the worst case of election violence—the cold-blooded murder of 10 supporters of Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) at Pallethalawinna in the Kandy district on election day, December 5.

The survivors of the attack alleged that thugs connected to the former PA minister Anurudhdha Ratwatte, including two of his sons, were responsible. The PA was particularly bitter about the SLMC which had switched to the opposition and precipitated the crisis that eventually forced the election.

Among the suspects detained were 30 soldiers, including an army captain, from Vijayaba Infantry Regiment stationed at Boyagane in the Kurunegala District. The police claim that it was from one of these soldiers that the information about the safe house was obtained. According to some media reports, one of Ratwatta’s sons, Chanuka, was a frequent visitor to the Millennium City safe house.

Both the government and opposition are now engaged in attempting to whitewash the military. Neither the UNP nor the PA want a serious investigation into such military units as such an inquiry would potentially expose their own systematic involvement in political thuggery. But working people should take a sharp warning from this whole episode—such squads can also be used against the working class, particularly as opposition and protests develop against the attacks being prepared on jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

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