

Ten people killed by police and Sinhala thugs in Eastern Sri Lanka

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Ten people were killed and dozens more were injured following a deliberate provocation by Sri Lankan security forces in the east of the island earlier this month.

The incident underscores the tense situation in the war-torn north and east of the country following the signing of a ceasefire between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in February. Sections of the military and Sinhala extremists opposed to concessions to the country's Tamil minority are determined to undermine any peace deal.

On October 9, five members of the special task forces (STF) assaulted a senior LTTE leader Pottuvil and other LTTE members outside the STF camp at Kanchirankudah. The STF is a specially trained police commando group, which is notorious for its brutal methods. The police, who were in civilian clothes, claimed that the LTTE members had failed to stop their vehicle at a roadblock.

That evening, around 1,000 people gathered outside the STF camp to protest against the assault and were fired upon by police. Seven people were killed, four of them youth under 19, and more than 30 people were injured. Police claim that agitators entered the camp and damaged a hut and communication equipment.

The next day, the LTTE and other Tamil parties called a hartal [strike and shop closures] throughout the north and east of the island which lasted for four days. On October 11, Tamils in the major port city of Trincomalee and in nearby villages hoisted black flags and burned tyres at road junctions to stop vehicles. Police, backed by Sinhala chauvinist thugs, fired on protesters, killing three people and injuring 49.

The government and the Colombo media have attempted to blame Tamils for the deaths. Defence Ministry Secretary Austin Fernando claimed that a hand grenade had been set off as the police fired tear

gas into the crowd. However, ordinary workers and villagers involved in the protests insist that the police were directly responsible.

Arokiyanathan, a welding worker from Anpuvallipuram, told the WWS: "The villagers of Anpuvallipuram gathered at the main road at about eight in the morning. Youth burnt tires and shouted slogans condemning the Kanchirankudah shooting. There were armed police in the junction. Suddenly a police jeep arrived. The officers got out and ordered people not to move. I saw a [Sinhala extremist] mob with clubs and swords standing on the other side of the road. Then, without warning, the police fired tear gas, threw hand grenades and opened fire. The mob also attacked people.

"My son collapsed due to the grenade blast. He lost both his legs and was bleeding. We tried to take the injured to hospital by vehicle but the mob, backed by the police, prevented us. It took us more than an hour to take them to the coast and from there to hospital by boat. Even then we had to avoid the navy. It took three hours to reach Trincomalee hospital. By that time, my son and two others were dead. Four others were struggling for their lives."

Arokiyanathan's son, Christy Mayuran, was just 17. The two others were Sonamuthu Konalingam, a 22-year-old municipal worker, who had married four months ago, and Kanapithipillai Sasindiran, a 36-year-old father of two. All died of blood loss.

At the Trincomalee hospital, posters condemned an attack on hospital staff who had tried to help those who were injured at Anpuvallipuram. Hospital workers went on strike for an hour on October 14 to protest against the assault. Hospital director, Dr Ganesha Bagu, told the WWS that doctors had gone to Anpuvallipuram to help, as the villagers had no way to transport the casualties.

He explained: “Dr Rohan rushed to the place with an ambulance. Since there was no driver for the other ambulance, I drove it and followed him. Near the place where attack took place, we were blocked by people armed with clubs, iron rods, bottles and swords. Armed police officers were just standing there. The mob attacked the ambulance and damaged it.”

Dr Rohan told us: “The ambulance driver is in a hospital ward to treat his wounds. They grabbed my shirt and warned I would suffer the same fate if I moved a foot. There were armed police officers and they did nothing. One fellow held my shirt and asked, ‘Did you come to save Tamils?’ As a doctor, I don’t see any difference between Tamils and Sinhalese. Even on the same night a Sinhala patient was brought to me. I attended him though I was not on duty.”

The entire staff, Sinhala and Tamil, took part in the strike and continued the protest for three days by wearing black armbands. A Sinhala nurse told us: “We shouldn’t allow this sort of thing to happen. These things are done by brutes.” She explained that another ambulance had been attacked at the same spot—the patients had belonged to all three communities, Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim.

Others also opposed communalism. Selvam, a photographer, who took part in the protests in Trincomalee, told the WSWs: “We have suffered enough due to this war and communal violence. A lot of us went to India as refugees and only came back in 1994 to start our life again in Trincomalee. [On the day of the hartal] I saw a Sinhala thug stabbing a youth while a police constable was holding him. Some wounded persons have given names of police officers that threw grenades and opened fire. I think there must be an organisation behind this attack. I don’t blame all Sinhalese people. These thugs have been brought in from outside.”

Large crowds attended the funeral procession for the three killed at Anpuvallipuram, which was addressed by several Tamil leaders including Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian R. Sampanthan and the LTTE political chief in Trincomalee, Thilak. Many people were sceptical, however. As one explained to us: “All of them said that they would speak to the defence minister and prime minister and asked for an independent impartial inquiry. But people have no faith in commissions and a so-called impartial inquiry. They

make these gestures just to cheat the public.”

In speaking to the WSWs, Sampanthan explained that he had not only called for a government inquiry but had proposed the formation of a squad of 200 Tamil youth to operate with security forces in Trincomalee. But as the incident itself reveals, the Sri Lanka security forces openly collaborate with Sinhala extremist groups carrying out violent attacks on Tamils.

Moreover, the TNA’s proposed solution reveals the communal nature of the peace plans being put forward by all sides—the government, the LTTE and other Tamil and Sinhala parties. What is being discussed is the institutionalisation of a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites that will be directed at maintaining communal divisions and deepening the exploitation of the working class. The recruitment of Tamil youth to work with the police and army will only strengthen the state apparatus for use against working people—Tamil and Sinhala alike.

As our interviews revealed, even after nearly two decades of civil war and the promotion of ethnic divisions, many people are opposed to communalism. This sentiment points the way to a genuine solution to the war and the continual erosion of living standards: a movement of working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—to fight for their class interests against the machinations, manoeuvres and violence of all of the ruling elites and their armed thugs.



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