

Sinhala extremists stir up anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lankan capital

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Sinhala extremists fanned a minor local dispute over the extension of a Muslim religious school in Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, into a major communal confrontation at the end of last month. Racist thugs looted and burned homes and businesses belonging to Muslims, prompting security forces to impose a three-day curfew throughout wide areas of the city. One person was killed and several others injured when soldiers fired on groups of Muslims.

The clashes began on October 30, one day before the second round of peace talks began in Thailand between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to seek an end to the country's protracted civil war. The clashes are symptomatic of the tensions being stirred up by Sinhala extremist groups, which oppose any concessions to the country's Tamil and Muslim minorities. In this charged atmosphere, literally any issue is being seized on to heighten communal animosity.

The confrontation took place in Maligawatte, an inner suburb that features a mixture of residences and small businesses. It is home to large numbers of poor Muslims and Sinhalese who are largely segregated in different areas, as well as small pockets of Tamils.

Local Muslims had established a religious school in 1999 on a tiny patch of land—about 50 square metres. In August, the school was planning to build an extension—with the permission of the city's municipal council—after purchasing another small piece of land.

Buddhist monks from the nearby Bodhirajaramaya temple, backed by the Sinhala chauvinist party Sihala Urumaya (SU), immediately began to agitate against the construction, claiming it would infringe the rights of Buddhists. A number of small protests were held which police then used to file a court case against the planned building on the grounds that it would “breach

the law and order”.

The court ruled in favour of the construction on October 25 and work began on the same day. Five days later, however, the police produced a letter from the Colombo Divisional Secretary, the city's chief administrative officer, demanding a halt to the work on the grounds that there was a dispute over the land. Thanabeddegama Sobitha, the Buddhist monk organising the opposition, admitted to the press that the letter had been written at his instigation.

When those in charge of the construction cited the court decision and refused to recognise validity of the letter, the police, including high-ranking officers, moved to halt the work. As the exchange with the police took place, groups of Sinhala thugs, who had gathered to watch events, began to throw stones and attack local Muslims. The police stood by as these gangs attacked and burned houses, looted businesses and torched vehicles. When groups of Muslims gathered to retaliate, the police chased them away.

As the situation started to escalate out of control, the government imposed a curfew in several areas of the city and mobilised some 7,000 soldiers and police to enforce it. The actions of the security forces, which are deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism, were directly mainly against Muslims. Soldiers opened fire in densely-populated areas to disperse groups of Muslims, killing a worker, Mohammed Junaid. In the same area, a 50-year-old woman, Buhari Fareeda, and a 26-year-old pregnant woman, Siththi Fawsia, received gunshot injuries and had to be treated in hospital.

Junaid was a father of four. His wife said he had been killed going to a small nearby store. Local residents explained that it had taken nearly 20 minutes to get him to hospital as a result of the army's indiscriminate shooting. He was pronounced dead on arrival. The

following day, 10,000 people participated in his funeral to voice their protest.

The police continued to enforce a 2pm-6am curfew on October 31 and November 1 in areas of central and northern Colombo. A number of people complained that their houses and businesses continued to be attacked during curfew hours. Of 500 houses and businesses belonging to Muslims in the Maligawatte area, about 300 have been damaged, along with a number of taxis, motorbikes, lorries and vans. Muslim gangs damaged about 10 houses belonging to Sinhalese in retaliatory attacks.

M.M.A. Nizam, a mechanic, told WSWs he rushed home on October 30 after hearing about the violence. “I came by taxi which belonged to the garage where I work. Thugs came to my house wielding clubs and swords. We ran away. I have three children. They destroyed my house and looted everything. A three-wheeler [a small motorised vehicle] was burned as well. We are poor people. My wife makes wire chains at home to earn a living. How can we start life again?”

Another resident, 49-year-old Mohamed Faiz, described what happened. “When someone pointed a pistol at me I ran away. Houses were destroyed by thugs from other areas, but they had people pointing out Muslim houses to them. Why should people do these things because of a religious school? We have lived together peacefully for years. But how can we do it in the future?”

While Sinhala chauvinists seized on the plans to extend the religious school to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment, it is clearly part of a broader agenda. A chauvinist leaflet handed out by organisations affiliated to the local Buddhist temple declared: “Come forward to stop the birth of another Afghanistan, to prevent the birth of more bin Ladens who will destroy Buddha statues.”

An organisation calling itself the “Armed Front for the Defence of Sinhalese” sent a threatening letter to a teacher at the religious school ordering a halt to construction work. While attempting to deny any involvement, SU issued a leaflet declaiming: “Stop illegal constructions! Mobilise for Buddhist rights! ... Unite Sinhalese! Go forward without fear!” SU leader Tilak Karunaratne provocatively told a press conference that vigilance was necessary because Islamic religious schools have terrorist connections.

This open incitement to communal violence took place as the SU, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and other Sinhala extremists from the Buddhist hierarchy and opposition Peoples Alliance intensified their campaign against the government-LTTE peace talks in Thailand. These groups are hostile to any moves to end entrenched discrimination against the country’s minorities and to the demands of the Muslim elite for the creation of a separate administrative district in the east of the island.

As for the small religious school in central Colombo, its construction is still on hold. A top-level meeting of Buddhist monks, Islamic priests and police held on November 2 and presided over by the Divisional Secretary for Colombo came down in favour of the Sinhala extremists. The school could continue to operate but without any extensions. Colombo’s deputy mayor told the press that the Buddhist Affairs Minister had “assured several leading Buddhist priests that the [construction] project would not go ahead”.



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