Sinhalese extremist thugs attack arts festival in Colombo

A correspondent
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In the days leading up to the Sri Lankan president's grab for power on November 4, various Sinhala extremist groups were stepping up pressure on the government, denouncing its attempts to restart peace talks with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) as a betrayal of the country. As part of the campaign, Sihala Urumaya (SU) organised a vicious attack on a two-day cultural festival in Colombo.

The aim of the festival was to bring Sinhala and Tamil artists together as a means of breaking down the suspicion and tensions engendered by 20 years of civil war. While its organisers, the Hiru group, extend uncritical support to the imperialist-sponsored peace process, the event nevertheless drew in leading Sinhala and Tamil writers, poets, film directors, journalists and musicians, reflecting a broad desire for an end to the war and the divisive communal politics that have dominated the island.

The attack was a pre-planned provocation. On October 29, the first day of the festival, a number of SU supporters were in the audience at the New Town Hall in central Colombo. When Dr. S. Yoganathan, a noted Tamil writer and a lecturer at the University of Jaffna, began his address, the SU members started yelling abuse in a determined effort to disrupt the gathering. After refusing requests to leave, they were expelled from the hall.

Shortly after, a gang of over 100 thugs armed with bicycle chains, sticks and knives and shouting "Kill the Tamils" attempted to storm the hall, but were repelled by the organisers as police stood by. Outside the building, they burnt the festival banners and flags and threw rocks until finally being forced out of the grounds by a police riot squad. Four people were injured in the attack—two journalists and a doctor, who received a knife wound to his forehead.

SU has denied any responsibility for the assault. But SU deputy secretary Nishantha Warnasinghe and Hadigalle Wimalasara, a rightwing Buddhist monk who is a leading figure of the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya (National Bhikku Federation), were directly involved. So blatant was the provocation that the police were compelled to arrest and charge five SU members, including Warnasinghe, over the incident.

The Sinhala extremists also threatened to disrupt the second day of the festival but were kept out of the grounds by a police guard. SU nevertheless staged a provocative march demanding the release of their members and the arrest of the organisers, as well as "LTTE members" taking part in the festival. Top SU and Buddhist monks participated in the march, threatening both the Hiru group and Sinhalese artists, whom they branded as "Sinhala Tigers". Several festival organisers and leading participants have subsequently received anonymous death threats, by phone and by mail.

SU's outrageous attack on democratic rights has been condemned by a number of artists. Leading Sri Lankan dramatist-filmmaker Dharmasiri Bandaranayake told the WSWS: "There was panic among us and it reminded me of the attack against Tamils in July 1983 [when the anti-Tamil pogroms occurred that led to the war]. These racists are afraid of close connections between Sinhala and Tamil artists. Artists should be able to create and perform with freedom. In the recent past, every time I have taken my work to the Tamil areas, I have been threatened in anonymous letters saying that I will not be allowed to perform for the Tigers." Because of such threats, Bandaranayake has been obliged to postpone a Tamil drama festival featuring artists from the war-torn north of the island.

The attack on the Colombo festival did not come out

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of the blue. For months, SU and a section of the Colombo media had been denouncing it, claiming it was part of the LTTE-sponsored “Pongu Tamil” (Tamil Revival) campaign. The SU began demanding the arrest of Tamil artists from the north and east of the island, describing them as “LTTE terrorists”. The *Island* and its Sinhala-language counterpart *Divayina* also seized on the opportunity to whip up communal tensions, featuring prominent articles and editorials condemning the planned festival as “Pongu Tamil”.

The Tamil organisations EPDP (Eelam Peoples Democratic Party) and PLOTE (Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam) tacitly supported these attempts to shut the festival down. Rather than mount a strident defence of the basic democratic right of the organisers to hold the event, they declared it should be called off in order to avoid communal clashes. Without offering any evidence, the two parties branded it as the work of the LTTE. The EPDP and PLOTE both collaborated with the Sri Lankan military in the war against the LTTE.

Far from backing off in the wake of the attack, SU has continued to denounce the festival’s organisers and blame them for the violence. Not only that—its statements have been published uncritically in the Colombo press. On November 11, following the release of its members on bail, the SU held a public meeting at the New Town Hall—the same venue as the festival—cheering and feting the attackers as heroes.

The SU’s provocative activities are a product of the tense political situation in Colombo. Several Sinhala extremist groups are competing with each other to whip up communal opposition to the so-called peace process. At this stage, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) appears to have gained the most from widespread disaffection with the two major parties—the ruling United National Front and the opposition Peoples Alliance.

Unlike the JVP, which resorts to populist and even Marxist phrasemongering, the SU is a more openly fascistic organisation, connected to those sections of the military, state bureaucracy and Buddhist hierarchy that have directly profited from the war. The SU has staged a series of racialist provocations in recent months as a means of shoring up its own base of support.

All those who value basic democratic rights should unequivocally condemn the SU’s attack on the Tamil and Sinhala cultural festival. Its aim is to stir up communal antagonisms and to maintain the climate of suspicion, fear and hostility that produced and sustained two decades of devastating war.

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