Sri Lankan political crisis heightens tensions in Jaffna

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A recent incident in the Sri Lankan town of Jaffna points to the sharp tensions that have developed in the north of the island as a result of the political standoff in Colombo between President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the United National Front (UNF) government.

On December 9, a 16-year-old Tamil youth, Selvarasa Vijeyakumar, was selling copies of *Eelanathan*, a newspaper sympathetic to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) near the main bus stand in Jaffna. Around 5.45 p.m., three soldiers manning a nearby sentry point approached him and told him not to sell the paper. In the ensuing argument, Vijeyakumar and another man were shot and had to be hospitalised.

Vijeyakumar told WSWS reporters that the soldiers had questioned him when they saw a photo of LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran on the front page of the paper. “They took me some distance from the station and told me that the LTTE paper should not be sold there. They questioned and threatened me. A soldier pointed a gun at me. I raised my hand and asked him not to shoot but he shot anyway. The bullet hit my hand and I ran off.”

A 27-year-old bus conductor, Thirunavukarusu Thiruchelvam, who had been loading passengers onto a nearby bus was seriously injured. He received a gun shot to his abdomen and had to be admitted to the emergency unit of the Jaffna hospital.

People in the vicinity, who had been watching what was taking place, immediately gathered around. They attempted to hold the soldiers until officials from the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) arrived. Soldiers and police fired into the air and used clubs and batons to force the release of the three and disperse the crowd. (The SLMM is the international agency monitoring the ceasefire agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.)

News of the army’s actions provoked widespread anger. People were also incensed by the coverage of the shooting in the Colombo press. Claims were made that a newspaper seller had provoked the shooting by attempting to throw a grenade at a sentry post. No independent evidence was offered.

Vijeyakumar told the WSWS that selling the newspaper is the only means he has to feed his family. “If I sell one paper I earn one rupee. I earn 100 or 150 rupees (about $US1) a day, some times less,” he said. With that he has to feed six of his family, including his father. He said he had also been threatened three months earlier by the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party—a Tamil militia closely aligned to the army.

Following the shooting, the Federation of Peoples Organisations called a protest throughout the Jaffna peninsula on December 11. All shops and government offices were closed for the day and most transport services, including taxis, came to a halt. Transport was provided for students who were in the middle of sitting for their GCE ordinary level exams.

The incident indicates that the Sri Lankan security forces have adopted a more provocative stance in Jaffna and elsewhere in the north and east since Kumaratunga seized control of the defence, interior and media ministries on November 4. The president accused the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe of making too many concessions to the LTTE and endangering national security. One of the factors impelling Kumaratunga to move against the government was the hostility of sections of the military top brass to the so-called peace process.

The shooting in Jaffna was not an isolated occurrence. In mid-November, a Tamil journalist, Velupillai Thavachelvam, was stopped for more than one hour at the Muhamalai army checkpoint near Elephant Pass and threatened for criticising the military

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in his articles.

Prior to the LTTE's "Heroes' Day" meetings on November 26, the army and the police attempted to obstruct preparations in several places. They pulled down decorations and ordered auto rickshaw drivers to remove flags from their vehicles. The Tamil Eelam Students Federation issued a statement reporting that the army entered their office, searched it illegally and assaulted two students.

In early December, UNF minister T. Maheswaran complained that the army had prevented him and his bodyguards from visiting Keerimalai, where a Hindu temple and a beach resort are situated. He organised a protest in front of his house, while armed police and soldiers stood by.

Prior to the signing of the ceasefire in February 2002, the security forces regularly flouted the democratic rights of ordinary Tamils in order to intimidate the population as a whole. Hundreds of arbitrary arrests took place under the country's draconian emergency legislation. The ceasefire has provided some relief to these oppressive conditions. But now that Kumaratunga has assumed control of the defence and interior ministries, it is clear that the military and police feel that the restraints are off.

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