

Sri Lankan police and army kill two plantation workers

Shree Haran, M. Thevarajah
12 May 2004

More than 400,000 Sri Lankan tea plantation workers carried out a one-day strike on May 3 to protest the killing of two Tamil workers in the town of Kandapola by the police and army on April 28. Workers participated from all the central hill districts, including Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Matale, Badulla, Kalutara and Ratnapura. Shops and businesses in many towns closed to show their solidarity with the protest.

The deaths took place after a seemingly minor incident involving a collision between a private bus and a three-wheeler taxi on the morning of April 28. An argument broke out between the Sinhala bus driver and the Tamil taxi driver, which rapidly escalated into communal violence. Kandapola is a small, rather remote town with a largely Tamil-speaking population, reflecting the predominance of Tamil workers in the surrounding plantations.

Within hours of the accident, the bus driver had returned with a gang of Sinhala supporters and began taunting Tamil three-wheeler drivers, who retaliated in kind. By the evening, a Sinhala crowd had been brought to town from nearby villages on the periphery of the tea plantations. As tensions rose, Tamil estate workers also gathered in the town. The two sides began pelting each other and local stores with stones.

Far from calming the situation, the police sided with the Sinhala mob. They fired shots into the air but did nothing to detain the Sinhala provocateurs. Some of those involved in the provocation are known thugs who support President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and have friendly relations with the police.

Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) leader P. Chandrasekaran told the media that he had informed the senior police superintendent at Nuwara Eliya that a serious incident was brewing, but the warning was

ignored.

At about 9 pm, a group of soldiers arrived in town. As tensions rose and clashes took place, police fired on Tamil workers, killing Alagan Wimalananthan, a 26-year-old agricultural worker from the nearby Park Estate. He was hit in the head and died on the spot. Another worker, who tried to take Wimalananthan's body away, was hit in his buttock. Scores of others were wounded.

Several eyewitnesses told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the soldiers then marched to the Nona Estate to prevent workers from rushing to town. A second worker—44-year-old Veerasamy Jayaram—was killed when the army squad opened fire on the crowd.

At least 10 workers were hospitalised with serious injuries. Three people are still being treated for wounds to their hands and stomach at the Nuwara Eliya general hospital.

Hundreds of police, including riot squads, were deployed to Kandapola after the incident and a curfew imposed. But on May Day, thousands of angry plantation workers took part in the funeral for the two dead workers to protest the police and army actions. The streets of the town were lined with black flags proclaiming the dead as martyrs.

Wimalananthan's father Azhahan told the WSWS: "The police defended the Sinhalese, chased us and fired at us. While police shot at us, the attackers were continuously throwing stones. We had nowhere to run and we were unarmed. I was just 30 feet away from my son when he was shot." Wimalananthan's wife, Jayaswary, who is three months pregnant, insisted that "the people responsible for these murders should be exposed".

A worker from Park Estate explained to the WSWS that such clashes had not taken place previously in

Kandapola. The trouble began, he said, after a police post was established in the town. “The police have been playing a sinister role trying to incite Sinhalese against Tamils. They favour Sinhala racialists.”

The attack on Tamil workers at Kandapola is the worst of a series of incidents that have taken place in the aftermath of the April 2 general election. In some cases, the instigators appear to be supporters of the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)—a coalition between the SLFP, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and other smaller parties—incensed that plantation workers voted for the rival United National Front (UNF). In the course of the election campaign, UPFA candidates deliberately stirred up anti-Tamil sentiment, accusing the UNF of selling out to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

On April 5, the day after the final election results were released, a group of thugs entered the Medagedera Estate at Mathugama in the Kalutara district at night. They abused workers for voting for the UNF and attacked them. When the police failed to take any action, more than 500 workers gathered in protest in front of the Mathugama local council. Nearly 30 families from the estate took shelter in a local temple.

In the same week, there were also attacks at a number of plantations in Ratnapura district, including the Kahawatta, Enthan, Nivithigala and Kiribathgala estates. According to workers, the thugs involved warned them not to inform the police and abused them, saying: “All the Tamils are Tigers (LTTE members). Didn’t you vote for the UNF, which supports the LTTE? Tamils and their votes are not wanted in this country.” Four workers from the Delvin estate were hospitalised.

After ignoring the violence for weeks, President Kumaratunga finally took action after the Kandapola killings, fearing the incident would provoke a wave of protests and strikes by plantation workers. After meetings with the plantation unions—the UPF and Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), she dispatched Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse to the area. Appearing alongside union representatives, he announced the president’s offer of 100,000 rupees [US\$100] in compensation to the families of each of the dead workers.

Last Wednesday, in a further effort to pacify plantation workers, Kumaratunga invited the families

of the victims to the presidential palace to present them with their cheques. She declared that she had decided to “clean up Nuwara Eliya and Kandapola police stations” and blamed appointments made under the previous UNF government. Posturing as an opponent of communalism, she declared that SLFP-led governments had in the 1990s acted to calm communal tensions. In fact, Kumaratunga’s SLFP and its Sinhala chauvinist ally, the JVP, are directly responsible for creating the present political climate in which such attacks take place.

On May 4, the day before Kumaratunga’s declaration, another plantation worker was killed on the Eduragala Estate at Ingiriya, 51 kilometres from Colombo. Narayanan Anthonimuththu, 39, a father of three, died after being attacked by a gang armed with swords and clubs. Perumal Usankar, 22, another Tamil worker, is in intensive care at the Colombo National Hospital in a critical condition and three others were injured.

A labour supervisor, Nandasena has been accused of leading the attack on Anthonimuththu and five of his relatives and friends. Workers told the WSWS that Nandasena had warned Anthonimuththu not to vote for the UNF and after the election warned: “Our government has come to power now. I will look after you.” Nandasena and his family are long-time SLFP supporters who during the campaign organised a meeting on the estate for SLFP candidate Vidura Wickramanayake.

Initially the police locked up Anthonimuththu’s brother for two days, after he went to the station to lodge a formal complaint. Nandasena was only arrested some time later.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact