

Sri Lankan president offers empty apology for 1983 pogrom

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When the Sri Lankan ruling elite starts to speak about honesty, it is always laced with a heavy dose of hypocrisy. That is certainly the case with President Chandrika Kumaratunga's recent public "apology" to the country's Tamil minority for the 1983 communal pogrom, which cost hundreds of lives, turned tens of thousands into refugees and marked the start of the country's devastating civil war.

Speaking at a meeting to mark the 21st anniversary of the pogrom, Kumaratunga declared: "Every citizen in this country should collectively accept the blame and make an apology to the tens of thousands who suffered. I would like to assign to myself that task on behalf of the State of Sri Lanka, the government and on behalf of all of us; all the citizens of Sri Lanka to extend that apology."

The "apology" was accompanied by nominal compensation to some of the victims. Just 72.3 million rupees [\$US702,000] will be paid to 937 people or an average of 77,000 rupees [\$750] for the injuries and destruction they suffered. Leaving aside the cost in lives, the loss of property alone in 1983 has been estimated to run into billions of rupees.

Kumaratunga's sweeping declaration that "every citizen" was to blame is to consciously obscure the role played by the ruling elites in Colombo not only for the pogrom itself but their deliberate resort to anti-Tamil chauvinism over the preceding decades and since. Ever since independence in 1948, the ruling class has responded to mass opposition and every challenge to its rule by fomenting communal divisions. Between 1958 and 1983, there were seven major anti-Tamil riots.

While the president now offers an empty apology for the events of 1983, her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was responsible for institutionalising the anti-Tamil discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s that paved

the way for the pogrom and the war. Along with the United National Party (UNP), she and the SLFP ruthlessly prosecuted the racist war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to ensure the predominance of the Sinhala elite over their Tamil counterparts.

Kumaratunga is offering an apology at this point in a pitiful attempt to ease communal tensions as the 30-month ceasefire with the LTTE teeters on the brink of collapse. She is well aware that a return to war would be deeply unpopular not only among masses of ordinary working people but with corporate leaders, who would regard such a step as an economic disaster.

Both Kumaratunga and her SLFP are thoroughly steeped in chauvinist politics. She is as incapable of opposing the slide back to a war that has already cost at least 65,000 lives, as she is unable to tell the truth about the events of 1983.

"Every citizen" was not to blame for the tragic events. It is open secret that this violence was instigated and organised by then UNP government of President J.R. Jayewardene. After the bodies of soldiers slain by the LTTE were brought to Colombo on July 23, 1983, an organised attack took place on Tamils in Colombo and other areas that lasted for two weeks.

Sinhala chauvinist thugs armed with sticks, iron bars and swords, as well as home-made petrol and kerosene bombs, unleashed a reign of terror with the open support or participation of the police and military. Tamil residences and businesses were set on fire and people were murdered in cold blood. In many areas, not even the tea kiosks and small vendors were spared.

The gangs openly drove around in vehicles from the government-owned transport board and other departments. They used electoral lists to identify and attack the homes of Tamils.

At least 500 people were brutally murdered in the capital Colombo and more than 100,000 fled to the north and east of the island as refugees. In the country as a whole, several thousands were killed—many were burned alive or hacked to death. Many young Tamil girls and women were gang raped. Even Tamil hospital patients were attacked and killed. On July 27, 53 Tamil political prisoners were brutally murdered in custody.

Ordinary Sinhalese were horrified at the carnage and many risked their own lives to try to save their friends and neighbours. They hid their neighbours, often for days, until they could flee to a safer place. In some areas, Sinhala workers attempted to save the property of their Tamil friends by declaring that no Tamils lived in the neighbourhood and turning away the thugs.

In a letter to President Jayewardene on August 10, 1983, Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) leader A. Amirthalingam directly accused the UNP of involvement. “The attack on the Tamil people is pure ethnic violence planned well ahead and executed with ruthlessness by forces close to the government. These forces include the armed forces for whom Mr Cyril Mathew [Industries Minister and UNP trade union leader] always holds a brief in Parliament,” he wrote.

A few days before the pogrom, on July 17, 1983, President Jayewardene had already hinted at what was to come in an interview in the British-based *Daily Telegraph*: “I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna people [Tamils] now.... Now we cannot think of them. Not about their lives or of their opinion about us.”

The pogrom served a definite political purpose. After coming to power in 1977, Jayewardene abandoned the previous policy of national economic regulation and launched an offensive against workers’ rights and conditions, as well as welfare and other services. Faced with mounting mass opposition, the UNP, like the previous SLFP-led government, deliberately whipped up communalism to divide the working class and to shore up its own declining base of support.

In her recent speech, Kumaratunga declared: “Something has gone wrong somewhere down the line. We should do a bit of soul-searching, cleanse our souls and take the country forward.”

But the pogrom was no accident or aberration. The Sri Lankan ruling class can no more meet the basic needs and aspirations of working people today than in

1983. And it will just as readily resort to the communal violence to preserve its rule. The challenge before the working class is to decisively reject all forms of racism and chauvinism and to unite to put an end to profit system that produces such atrocities.



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