

Two prisoners shot dead as the tsunami hit Sri Lanka

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In the midst of the many tragic stories in Sri Lanka on December 26, the killing of two prisoners at Galle jail stands out as a demonstration of the ruthlessness of the state apparatus towards ordinary people.

Around 800 prisoners—some convicted, others on remand—were packed into the jail buildings, located in the middle of the southern city. About 30 guards and officers were on duty. When the first wave hit at around 9.10 a.m., the situation became chaotic.

The female ward was inundated and water rose to over a metre. Prisoners were also hearing reports on the radio of tsunami waves lashing coastal areas and taking hundreds of lives. Fearful of further waves and concerned about the fate of their families, the prisoners demanded they be released. Most of the inmates were from areas around Galle.

“Our wives and children could be affected. We want to go home. We want to protect them,” some yelled out. Like people throughout the country, they were desperate for news of their loved ones. Many of the southern towns, including Galle itself, were devastated by the tsunami with thousands of lives lost. Even though the scale of the destruction was not apparent at the time, the initial reports were nevertheless alarming.

After receiving no response from prison officials, the inmates became desperate. Some began to pelt the guards with stones. Others tried to get out. Adamant that no one was going to be released, prison management called on the army for assistance and a unit of 15 soldiers arrived. Amid the escalating disaster in Galle, prison officials cited legal ordinances and maintained that they were not authorised to release prisoners. Evacuation could be considered, they declared, but only if there was an immediate threat to lives.

Frantic to get out, several inmates attempted to break

open the gates with iron bars. The prison guards immediately opened fire with automatic rifles and shotguns. Others weighed in with batons. Two prisoners were killed on the spot and another eight received gunshot wounds.

The WSWs has not been able to ascertain the names of the dead prisoners, only that they had been on remand. The injured prisoners were taken to the prison hospital and the major Galle public hospital at Karapitiya. More than 550 of the inmates were later evacuated to a prison camp at Boosa, some 10 kilometres from Galle. According to later reports, the waves seriously damaged jail property.

A magistrate, who held an inquiry into the deaths, commended the actions of the guards. As far as he was concerned, the prisoners had no rights, even if their lives were in danger. Indifferent to the sentiments of the prisoners, he insisted that the authority of the state had to be upheld, regardless of the circumstances—in this case, a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions.

Inmates in other prisons faced similar dangers. Some were evacuated, while others managed to save their lives by escaping. It is not known at this stage how many lost their lives.

At Matara, just to the east of Galle, the local prison held 404 inmates when the tsunami hit. The jail was swamped and one of its outer walls collapsed. Prisons Commissioner General Rummy Marzook told the media that 76 inmates were rescued and later transferred to Kuruwita prison. The rest, he explained, were still missing.

At Tangalle and Negombo, prison inmates were evacuated to inland jails.

The ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has taken no further action. No official inquiry has been established into the deaths. As far as the

government is concerned, the matter is closed: the authority of the state takes precedence over the basic needs of prisoners, even the right to live.



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