

# A spate of police killings in Sri Lanka

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28 April 2005

In the midst of an ongoing law-and-order campaign in Sri Lanka, there have been a series of suspicious police killings. Over the last four months alone, the media has reported the deaths of at least 19 people. In each case, the police claimed to have been defending themselves after being attacked by suspects attempting to escape. By its silence, the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has given tacit approval to the police actions.

An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* last month, which was generally devoted to calling for more police and tougher measures, conceded that the police stories were shallow. It dismissed the victims as “the scum of the earth” then added:

“Yet in almost all these cases the excuse given out is that each suspect taking the police to show their arms caches suddenly pulls out a grenade or a gun to attack the policeman who immediately fires back killing the suspect on the spot. It is even stranger that judicial officers who inquire don’t see the one too many coincidences. In one instance the shooting was attributed to a handcuffed suspect attempting to strangle a police officer!”

Two stories suffice to demonstrate the spurious nature of the police claims. On April 12, the *Lakbima* newspaper reported the death of a criminal suspect named Keerthi Prasanna Kumara. Police took him to a cemetery in Kotugoda in the Minuwangoda area, 50 km from Colombo, during the early hours of April 11. According to police, Kumara claimed there was an arms cache in one of the graves. While searching for the arms, he allegedly jumped a police sergeant, seized his revolver and started firing on police before being shot dead. None of the police were injured.

Last month, the *Sunday Island* told a similar story: “The suspect, Madura Fernando was being brought to Ragama on outskirts of Colombo in the early hours of March 5, when he suddenly leapt and tried to strangle

the police officer that was driving the jeep, using handcuffs. There was no option but to open fire to prevent the police officer from being killed as the jeep veered off the road near the Ragama level crossing.”

Sri Lanka’s Civil Rights Movement (CRM) told the WSWS it was concerned that these were extra-judicial killings by the police and had requested the intervention of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka. The CRM representative noted similarities to the methods used in the widespread killing of unemployed rural youth and suspected members of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1989-91. At that time, the security forces and associated death squads slaughtered an estimated 60,000 young people in an effort to suppress social unrest in the south of the island.

The police were intimately involved with the military in prosecuting the country’s civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Under the country’s notorious emergency laws, the security forces rounded up thousands of Tamils as “LTTE suspects” and held them for lengthy periods without trial. In some cases, the detainees were tortured. Since the 2002 ceasefire, the police appear to have turned their attention to alleged criminals.

According to the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), during the first three months of 2004 at least seven deaths in police custody were reported. An “anti-crime unit” was established in the police department in mid-2004 incorporating members of the Special Task Force (STF), trained police commandos who worked in conjunction with the military against the LTTE.

Last November President Chandrika Kumaratunga seized on the blatant daylight murder of district judge Sarath Ambepitiya to launch an offensive against “the rising crime wave” and raise the possibility of reactivating the country’s death penalty. A drug dealer allegedly killed the judge. As with “law-and-order”

campaigns in other countries, Kumaratunga is seeking to prey on the fears of ordinary people to justify ruthless police methods and to deflect attention from the government's responsibility for creating the social problems that give rise to crime.

In Sri Lanka, the combination of civil war, a lack of jobs and widespread destitution has created a breeding ground for violent crime. Thousands of army deserters with training and access to weapons have either become guns for hire or have become part of various criminal rackets. Many of these thugs are employed by politicians to do the dirty work of threatening their opponents. Some criminals, including the killers of Judge Ambepitiya, are alleged to have links to top political figures and to the police themselves.

Police officers have been accused of other killings and not just of suspected criminals. On October 3, 2004, police reportedly killed Quintus Perera, a restaurant manager at Polonnaruwa in the North Central province who refused to provide liquor due to a religious day prohibition. On November 21, 2004, police allegedly murdered Gerard Mervyn Perera in broad daylight at Mabola on the outskirts of Colombo. Perera had previously filed a fundamental rights application in the Supreme Court over police torture.

The media has backed Kumaratunga's latest police offensive. An editorial in the *Island* on April 1 entitled "Rights of criminals and the plight of the civilised" declared: "These monsters (criminals) would have been killed anyway in gang wars and otherwise worst of all, they could have killed, robbed and raped many more people had they lived longer. We are sad to say that but it is the truth."

The editorial concluded by calling for a free hand for police: "At long last the police have begun to play hard ball with criminals and are beating them at their own game. Let no obstacle be slapped in their way to impede the ongoing anti-crime offensives. More strength to those dedicated men and officers!"

In comments to the *Sunday Island* on April 3, Sri Lanka's Inspector General of Police Chandra Fernando justified the killings. "We have not murdered anybody. We have certainly arrested various gangs in connection with grave crimes. If anybody has lost his life following such an arrest, it is a result of his clashing with the police and attempting to flee," he said.

Fernando expressed his contempt for democratic

rights. He cited former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who advocated making "discipline" the priority for creating economic development ahead of democratic rights. "There must be discipline within civil society and this must apply to everyone and not only the police. The first priority of human rights organisations should be not to control the police but to help the police to act within the framework of the law and ensure a decent, disciplined society," he stated.

The police campaign has gone hand in hand with further inroads into fundamental democratic rights. The opposition joined with the government to pass two bills last month. The first extends the period that police can hold a suspect without a warrant from 24 hours to 48 hours and also authorises senior police to take blood samples for DNA testing.

The second piece of legislation, in the name of expediting justice, allows for the by-passing what were known as non-summary inquiries held prior to high court trials. At non-summary inquiries, the police had to prove to a judge that there was a case for the accused to answer. Now cases can go straight to trial—a procedure that will strengthen the hand of the police in putting pressure on suspects.

The strengthening of police powers and the "law-and-order" offensive are not primarily aimed at criminals. Rather they reflect deep concerns in ruling circles in Colombo over growing social unrest produced by the impact of the government's economic restructuring program. Rising prices, high levels of unemployment and poverty and the slashing of social services have all been further accentuated by the devastation caused by the December 26 tsunami.



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