

Obscure Sri Lankan group claims responsibility for Tamil journalist's murder

Our correspondent
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A previously unknown Sri Lankan group calling itself the “Therapuththabhaya Brigade” issued an “announcement” last week claiming responsibility for the recent murder of prominent Tamil journalist Dharmaratnam Sivaram.

Sivaram was a senior editor of the *Tamilnet* website, known for its political sympathy with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He was abducted in Colombo on April 28 and his body dumped on the outskirts of the capital on same night. Nearly three weeks after his death, police have failed to unearth any clues as to the perpetrators.

The group’s letter ominously warned that those who harmed the “motherland... should be ready to become manure for the motherland very soon”.

A number of public figures have received death threats. They include: Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, a well-known artist; Victor Ivan and Lasantha Wickramatunga, the editors of Sinhala and English language newspapers, *Ravaya* and *Sunday Leader*; Sunanda Deshapriya, a journalist; Wickramabahu Karunaratne, leader of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP); and peace activist Pakyasothy Saravanamuththu.

Bandaranayake is known for his promotion of joint activities between Sinhala and Tamil artists. The others publicly support attempts to restart peace negotiations between the Colombo government and the LTTE. Like other Sinhala chauvinist groups, the “Therapuththabhaya Brigade” regards any concessions to the LTTE and the country’s Tamil minority as tantamount to treason.

The letter branded the opposition United National Party (UNP) and “sections” of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the main party in the country’s ruling coalition—as “Green Tigers” and “Blue Tigers”

conspiring to divide the country and grant a separate state of Eelam to the LTTE. The Norwegian government, which has acted as a mediator in the so-called peace process, was denounced as a “White Tiger”.

The murder of Sivaram is part of a campaign being waged by a number of Sinhala political parties and groups to inflame social tensions by whipping up anti-Tamil communalism. Two decades of devastating civil war have created powerful vested interests in the Sri Lankan military top brass, state bureaucracy, sections of business and the Buddhist hierarchy. Moreover, stirring up Sinhala chauvinism is a convenient means to divert attention from the country’s acute social tensions.

The name “Therapuththabhaya Brigade” is designed to invoke a mythologised past when ancient Sinhala kings dominated the island. Therapuththabhaya was the name of a legendary warrior who fought under the ancient Sinhala king Dutugamunu, revered by Sinhalese communalists for defeating a Tamil king and “uniting the country”.

It is not clear who is behind the “Therapuththabhaya Brigade” or even whether it exists as a separate entity. Several organisations have been prominent in a campaign against attempts by President Chandrika Kumaratunga to reach an agreement with the LTTE to form a joint mechanism to provide relief to the victims of the December 26 tsunami that devastated much of coastal Sri Lanka.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is part of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), has threatened to walk out of the government if any joint mechanism is established. JVP demagogues claim that such a deal would amount to formal recognition for the LTTE and be a step toward a

separate Tamil state. It is vying with the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) or Pure Sinhala National Heritage for political dominance.

While it is not clear who is responsible for Sivaram's murder or the "Therapuththabhaya Brigade", the JVP and JHU both have a record of communal violence.

In the period 1987-1990, the JVP, then a proscribed party, unleashed a fascistic terror campaign through a front organisation named Deshapremi Janatha Viyaparaya (DJV) or Patriotic Peoples Movement against the Indo-Lanka Accord, which was an attempt to end the civil war by imposing an Indian "peace-keeping" force in the north and east of the island.

Those who opposed the JVP's campaign were denounced as "Green Tigers" or traitors and targeted by the DJV's gunmen. Three members of Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP)—were among those murdered in cold blood. The RCL upheld the principles of international socialism, opposing both the JVP's chauvinist campaign and the Indo-Lankan Accord, exposing it as a deal designed to intensify the exploitation of the working class.

The JHU and its precursor Sihala Urumaya (SU) have been implicated in various acts of communal violence, including attacks on Christian churches in 2003 and 2004. Led by Buddhist priests, the JHU frequently invokes a mythical Sinhala history to justify its demands for what amounts to a Sinhala Buddhist theocratic state. The party has previously painted its leader Ellawela Medhananda as a modern day "Therapuththabhaya"—the monk who disrobed and became a warrior to defend the Sinhala kingdom.

Following Sivaram's assassination, the JHU issued a chilling warning along the lines of the latest "Therapuththabhaya Brigade" declaration. In a statement welcoming the murder, the JHU declared: "The fate of the editor of the *Tamilnet* is a warning example to all those who oppose the country in the future."

The campaign by the JHU and JVP has not come out of the blue. President Kumaratunga herself denounced the so-called peace process and accused the previous United National Front (UNF) government of undermining "national security". On this pretext, she dismissed the government and called fresh elections in April 2004, which her SLFP narrowly won in alliance

with the JVP and other parties.

Having come to power, however, Kumaratunga immediately came under pressure from the major world powers and the most powerful sections of big business to resume peace talks. After two decades of war, corporate leaders in Colombo and foreign investors want a negotiated peace deal with the LTTE that will pave the way for economic restructuring and greater opportunities for profit. The president has tentatively attempted to restart the peace process, fuelling opposition from her communal allies.

Political conflict over a government-LTTE joint mechanism comes amid sharpening social tensions fuelled by the government's economic program and its failure to provide significant relief to tens of thousands of tsunami victims. In times of crisis, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has repeatedly encouraged communal conflict to divide the working class and prevent a unified struggle against its bankrupt rule.

The murder of Sivaram and the "Therapuththabhaya Brigade" statement are sharp warnings to working people that the ruling elite and its political agents will not hesitate to use the most ruthless and anti-democratic methods again.



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