

Erection of Buddha statue produces communal tensions in Sri Lanka

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Events in the eastern port city of Trincomalee in Sri Lanka in recent weeks have heightened communal tensions throughout the country, as well as the danger of a return to civil war.

The immediate trigger was the erection of a statue of Buddha in the town centre under cover of darkness on the night of May 15. The Trincomalee Three Wheel Drivers Association (TWDA) was responsible for the provocative act, but other communal groups, including the Sashanarakshaka Balamandalaya of Trincomalee (SB) and the Northern Eastern Sinhala Organisation (NESO), were also involved.

Trincomalee has a mixed population of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims and has been ravaged by nearly two decades of war. An increasingly fragile ceasefire between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been in place since early 2002. The erection of a Buddha statue in the centre of the city was calculated to provoke opposition from Tamils and inflame communal sentiment.

Successive Colombo governments have for years settled impoverished Sinhala villagers in the area as a means of altering the communal balance and providing a base of support for the war against the LTTE. The LTTE considers Trincomalee as a potential regional capital if a peace deal is reached with the Colombo government on a powersharing arrangement.

As soon as statue was erected, the Trincomalee District Tamil Peoples Forum (TPF) organised a city-wide hartal—strike and business shutdown—on May 17 to demand its removal. Most shops and offices closed on the day and transport came to a halt. Clashes took place between Tamil and Sinhalese mobs. One person was killed and several were injured after hand bombs were set off in a number of places. A local politician later reported that a Tamil youth had been shot dead at

the nearby village of Sirimapura.

After the TPF lodged a formal complaint, a Trincomalee magistrate ordered both sides to “peacefully settle” the issue, but no agreement was reached. The hartal continued for four more days, leading to further violent clashes. The only shops that remained open belonged to Sinhalese and Muslims. The TPF called off its campaign on the Buddhist festival of Vesak (May 22-23), but warned protests would resume.

The statue has become a rallying point for Sinhala chauvinists throughout the island. Two parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—quickly jumped on the communal bandwagon. In a statement to parliament on May 18, JVP MP Wimal Weerawansa declared that “it is the Sinhala population that is victimised” and called on the government “to ensure the right of every religion”. The obvious implication was that the Buddha statue and the “rights of Sinhalese” had to be defended.

The JHU was even more forthright. Senior JHU MP and Buddhist monk Athuraliye Rathana made two statements in parliament defending the erection of the statue. Rathana, along with JHU leader Ellawela Medhananda, took part in a sit-down protest at Pettah in central Colombo on May 19 against the removal of the statue and against the government’s plans to establish a joint body with the LTTE to distribute aid to tsunami victims.

Speaking at the protest, Medhananda launched into a diatribe against the LTTE and other Tamil organisations. He declared that the campaign by Tamil groups in Trincomalee was part of a plot to drive Sinhalese residents out of the area. The JHU leader called on the government to destroy an alleged “airstrip” in LTTE-controlled territory—an action that

would be a flagrant act of war—and demanded that the LTTE give up its arms before any agreement was reached on the distribution of tsunami aid.

As tensions escalated in Trincomalee, Defence Secretary Ashoka Jayawardene visited the area on May 21 in response to an army request for more troops. He ordered the bolstering of security and that all state institutions, banks and shops be kept open. The military has since demarcated four high-security zones and strengthened checkpoints in the city. On the pretext that the statue was about to be attacked, the army erected a barbed wire fence around the area on May 25 and posted soldiers to guard the edifice.

On May 29, the SB and NESO further inflamed tensions at a press conference in Colombo. SB leader Dehiowita Piyatissa declared that the statue would only be removed over his dead body and asked why the government had not cracked down on Tamil protesters.

Another monk, Bengamuwe Nalaka, secretary of the Patriotic Buddhist Bikkhu Front (Desha Premi Bikkhu Sanvidhanaya), drew an absurd parallel between calls for the removal of the Buddha statue in Trincomalee and the Taliban's destruction of centuries-old stone statues at Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001.

The Colombo media has effectively backed the communal campaign, with the Island group of newspapers playing a particularly despicable role. On May 29, the Sinhala language *Irida Divayina* defended the erection of the statue in Trincomalee, declaring its removal would be “the death knell of Sinhala Buddhists”. The editorial invoked the spurious justification for Sinhala Buddhist domination of the island: Buddha on his death bed declared Sri Lanka would protect Buddhism.

The campaign has compounded the political difficulties confronting President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The JVP, which is the second largest component of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Party (UPFA), has declared it will quit the government if a joint aid mechanism with the LTTE is established. As a result, the president is desperate to defuse tensions over the statue, which is becoming another source of friction in the coalition.

The UPFA government issued a statement on May 25 “expressing its concern over the tense situation in Trincomalee” and calling for a solution “that would be just and fair by all concerned and in conformity of the

law”. It blamed “small groups” for the trouble, “with the assistance of the several outside forces”.

The Attorney General filed a case on behalf of the government on June 1 in the Trincomalee district court calling for the construction of a statue on the state land to be declared unlawful. It also called for an enjoining order to prevent any addition to the statue until the court resolved the matter. The district judge issued a notice to the parties responsible for erecting the statue to appear before the court on June 13.

Kumaratunga also sent a second ministerial delegation to Trincomalee on June 1 to seek a compromise between Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil groups, but to no avail. The various Sinhala organisations involved refused to even meet with the government delegation headed by River Valley Development Minister Maithripala Sirisena.

TPF leaders took part in the meeting, along with Hindu and Catholic religious representatives. After receiving assurances that security forces would be withdrawn from Trincomalee, the TPF agreed to halt its campaign but only until a court ruling on the issue on June 13. Last Friday the TNA and TPF called a general shutdown to protest over the fact that troops had not been withdrawn from the town.

There is no resolution in sight. The Sinhala communal groups involved in the campaign have indicated that they will not abide by any court decision. Kumaratunga is not prepared to seriously challenge these organisations and their reactionary agitation for “Buddhist rights” because her Sri Lanka Freedom Party, like the Colombo political establishment as a whole, is just as mired in communal politics as the JVP and JHU.



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