

Unanswered questions about Sri Lankan foreign minister's assassination

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It is now two weeks since Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was shot dead by a sniper at his private residence in Colombo late in the evening of August 12.

As far as the Sri Lankan media and political parties are concerned, there is no doubt that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out the murder. Within hours of the killing, senior police officials and military spokesmen announced that the LTTE was responsible.

Sinhala chauvinist parties, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), seized on the assassination, denounced the current ceasefire with the LTTE and began agitating for demands that are tantamount to a return to war. As part of their campaign, they have denounced anyone who has failed to name the LTTE as the killers.

The Colombo press has been full of “analysis” and stories, many of them simply cooked up, about Kadirgamar’s murder and the police investigation. All of them begin by assuming that the LTTE, which has publicly denied any responsibility, was to blame. No alternatives have even been canvassed.

It is possible that the LTTE did order the assassination. It has gained very little from the ceasefire. Peace talks have been stalled since 2003 and efforts to establish a joint tsunami aid mechanism with Colombo have been delayed repeatedly. In the Eastern Province, its officials, offices and fighters are being attacked regularly by a breakaway faction that receives covert support from the Sri Lankan military.

However, the chief beneficiaries of Kadirgamar’s assassination have been the JVP, the JHU and sections of the security forces that have adamantly opposed the aid agreement, the ceasefire and the entire “peace process”. It is certainly possible that elements from these reactionary layers could have hatched a conspiracy to murder Kadirgamar and pin it on the LTTE so as to poison any renewal of peace talks.

Virtually no one in Colombo has even raised the possibility. Before falling into line with the clamour against the LTTE, President Chandrika Kumaratunga blamed the killing on “political foes opposed to the peaceful transformation of conflict”. The comment is particularly significant as the president is well aware of the entrenched opposition inside the military as well as the hostility of the JVP, which quit the ruling coalition in June over her decision to sign an aid agreement with the LTTE.

Just as significant are the reasons for Kumaratunga’s about-face. In last weekend’s *Sunday Times*, the newspaper’s political editor, who has many high-level political connections, revealed that Kumaratunga had come under sharp behind-the-scenes criticism from the JVP for failing to blame the LTTE. “[H]ow can I blame the LTTE? I am the

president and I must have some evidence before I say such a thing,” an exasperated Kumaratunga told a ministerial colleague. Yet that evening [August 14] she appeared on national television and declared that the LTTE was responsible—without offering a shred of evidence.

Immediately after the killing, the police announced that they had detained two Tamils—“LTTE suspects”—engaged in surveillance with a video camera near Kadirgamar’s house a fortnight earlier. Since then, the police investigation has produced no proof that the LTTE carried out the murder. The limited “evidence” is circumstantial and inconclusive, and raises more questions than answers. The killer or killers have not been caught. Moreover, the police appear to have few leads.

The WSWs spoke to Senior Police Superintendent Sarath Lugoda, director of the Colombo Crime Division and a member of the investigative team. Asked about progress in the case, he said: “There is no clue still as to the persons who did the crime.” While he believed that the LTTE was responsible, Lugoda added: “[I]t is not possible to say whether it [the killing] was done by the LTTE or any other group until the investigations are over.” He said that about 100 people had been questioned but no one had been detained.

The WSWs also spoke to the chief military spokesman, Brigadier Daya Ratnayake, who insisted that there was no doubt that the LTTE killed Kadirgamar. When asked about evidence, he admitted that “it [the LTTE’s responsibility] has not been established. The investigations are being carried out in an open mind.”

In fact, the investigation is being carried out with anything but “an open mind”. No effort is being made to investigate the possible involvement of the military, the police or various Sinhala communal organisations. Virtually all of those who are being rounded up for interrogation are Tamils in an effort to find a connection to the LTTE. Yet, despite two weeks of inquiries, the police still have “no clue” as to the killers.

Based on what has been made public, there are many unanswered questions about the Kadirgamar assassination. Moreover, much of what has been leaked to the media is either dubious or has been later shown to be misleading or false.

* Kadirgamar was shot at about 10.45 p.m., after a swim in a pool at his home at Bullers Lane in a well-to-do area of central Colombo. Captain Manatunga, head of his security detail, has testified to a magisterial inquiry that there were five security personnel around the pool and at the home. He said he heard the shots, returned fire and then with the other guards took the minister to the National Hospital.

Why was no effort made to catch the killers? Even if Manatunga and the guards were preoccupied with saving Kadirgamar’s life, why did other security forces take no action? In such circumstances, the police

and military rapidly establish roadblocks to check vehicles. Yet after the murder of one of the country's most senior ministers, no roadblock was set up for at least two hours. "He [the assassin] had ample time to escape," a senior police officer told the *Sunday Island*.

* Police revealed that the shots came from a bathroom in the upper floor of a neighbouring house just 35 metres from the pool. The gunman set up a rifle on a tripod constructed out of aluminium pipes and fired through a small opening in the bathroom window. A grenade was fired from a rocket launcher but failed to explode. The launcher was found abandoned in nearby shrubs. The gunman took the rifle and together with a possible accomplice was able to get away. Police said that it was possible that the killers may have been in the bathroom for some time.

Why was no effort made to ensure that neighbouring houses were secure? Sri Lanka, which has been embroiled in civil war for two decades, has a long history of political assassination. Specially trained personnel from the Ministerial Security Division (MSD) guard all ministers. The checking of possible vantage points for gunmen is an elementary precaution that is routinely performed around VIP residences or when VIPs are travelling in vehicles. Why were these measures not taken for Kadirgamar who, next to the president and prime minister, had the highest security priority?

* The owner of the neighbouring house, Lakshman Thalayasingham, told a magisterial inquiry on August 15 that the police arrived at his house somewhere between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m. on August 13—that is, at least two hours after Kadirgamar's murder. The obvious question is: why did it take so long after the murder to check the house from which the shots were fired?

The Colombo media has made much of the fact that Thalayasingham is a Tamil. Unsubstantiated stories have been circulated attempting to link him or his brothers to the LTTE. One version is that he was a drunk who was drawn into the plot with the LTTE with the offer of money. Another is that one of his brothers living in London collected funds for the LTTE. Yet another is that one of his servants was involved.

Thalayasingham told the inquiry he did not use the upper floor of his home and lived mainly downstairs with his invalid wife. He also said that, if he had been asked, he would readily have allowed the security forces access to his house. Significantly, the police have taken no action against him or his brothers. Thalayasingham was grilled for hours and released. According to media reports, police advised the government to seek his brother's extradition but no action has been taken.

* Last weekend the *Sunday Times* revealed that Kadirgamar had received a warning from a Western intelligence agency via the country's Directorate of Military Intelligence of a plan to kill him. "The brief one paragraph warning said a plot to assassinate him was to be executed in August 2005," the article stated. Yet no urgent efforts were made to beef up his security detail, despite longstanding requests. "Approval for additional security was granted—ironically on the day he was assassinated—eleven months after the first request," it continued.

The *Sunday Times* attempted to explain the lapse in security by reporting the comments of a Tamil "businessman with very close links to the LTTE", whom Kadirgamar spoke with on occasions. The businessman had assured the minister that the LTTE would not target him until he left office. The article concluded that Kadirgamar had been lulled into letting down his guard, but did not entertain the possibility that someone other than the LTTE killed the minister.

Moreover, why were those responsible for Kadirgamar's security duped? Who exactly did the "Western intelligence agency" say planned to kill the minister and why was no action taken to bolster his guard?

* The police initially claimed that the assassin had used a sniper's rifle. However, the government analysts department confirmed to the WWSW that that was not the case. The spent cartridges produced in court by police did not indicate the use of such a weapon. An article in the state-owned *Sunday Observer* last weekend added "most surprisingly" that Kadirgamar had been killed by "a sub-machine gun that had been stolen either from the armed services or purchased from an arms dealer". In other words, Kadirgamar was not killed with a specialist rifle but with an automatic weapon of the type used by the Sri Lankan armed forces and that is readily available throughout the country.

* A *Daily Mirror* report on August 18 contained another piece of misinformation. It claimed that police had found two cyanide capsules near his Thalayasingham's residence. While making the obvious point that cyanide capsules are an LTTE trademark, the article did not explain why the killers, if they were LTTE, would leave the capsules behind. Surely if they feared capture by police, they would take the capsules with them. As it turns out, the story appears to have been fabricated from thin air and has since been dropped by police.

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, military spokesman Daya Ratnayake declared that the killing had "all the hallmarks" of the LTTE. In fact, the opposite is the case. Suicide bombers, not snipers, have been the "hallmark" of LTTE assassinations. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, as well as several high-level Sri Lankan ministers, were all killed by suicide bombers. In 1999, Kumaratunga survived a similar attack. Unlike suicide bombings, which require a high degree of commitment, there is no shortage of soldiers, army deserters, paramilitary members and gangsters in Sri Lanka with the necessary skills to fire a rifle to kill a minister—either for political or financial motives.

The unanswered questions all point in one direction. If those in charge of Kadirgamar's security were not bungling amateurs then the minister could well have been the victim of a high-level plot involving the military or police. After two decades of war, there is literally nothing that the sections of security and intelligence apparatus would not do to further their aims. If that is the case, it would also explain the lack of any progress in the police inquiries—the state apparatus is engaged in investigating itself.

Whoever carried it out, the murder has been immediately seized upon to crack down on democratic rights. Virtually all the major established parties have set aside their tactical differences to approve a state of emergency giving the police and military extraordinary powers of arrest and detention. The president has the right to impose media censorship and to ban protests and rallies. These measures will not be used to track down Kadirgamar's killers. Above all they will be used against working people—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike.



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