

# Sri Lankan military fires on Jaffna university protest

Our Jaffna correspondents  
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On two successive days this week, the Sri Lankan security forces have fired on and assaulted unarmed protesters from Jaffna University. These provocative actions have further inflamed an already tense situation in northern Sri Lanka and threaten to undermine the three-year ceasefire between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

On Monday, more than 200 university teachers and students were shot at as they were marching towards the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire. The protestors wanted to present a letter requesting that the SLMM intervene to stop the military harassment of Tamils in the Jaffna area.

When the marchers reached the Parameswara junction, about 200 metres from the university, they were blocked by soldiers. When the university vice chancellor attempted to argue for their right to march, troops opened fire then rushed the crowd, beating staff and students with their rifle butts.

At least 14 protestors were injured, including Professor N. Perinpanathan and medical faculty student leader T. Kandeepan. The vice chancellor Professor C. Mohandas and Professor R. Sivachandran were among those beaten by soldiers. Reporters for the Tamil newspapers *Thinakkural*, *Thinakaran* and *Namathu Eelanadu* were also assaulted and their cameras damaged.

The military claimed that it only fired warning shots after the protestors surrounded the soldiers. Students and teachers denied the military's claim. Doctors confirmed that one university teacher and a student had been admitted to Jaffna hospital suffering from gunshot injuries.

WSWS correspondents spoke with four of the injured Jaffna University teachers and students at the Jaffna hospital, including the two who had been shot.

Professor Sivachandran explained: "We were marching to the SLMM office. It was a peaceful march. At the Parmeswara junction, the military blocked us and warned us. The vice chancellor introduced himself to convince them to let us go on. When they prepared to shoot, we all laid down. A soldier attacked me with the rifle butt."

One side of Professor Sivachandran's shoulder was injured. After treatment he was discharged. "Now that this situation has developed, it could turn to worse. How can students conduct their studies when there is an army presence and patrols?" he asked.

V. Senthill, a 22-year-old second year management student, was shot in the back. Doctors warned him that attempting to remove the bullet would be dangerous.

Professor N. Perinpanathan, an economics lecturer, was shot in his right thigh as he attempted to lie down when the shooting began. He said the army began firing without instructing them to disperse. "If there is no peace there will be no progress. We want to live a peaceful life," he added.

T. Kandeepan, a final year medical student, was injured in the thigh when soldiers clubbed him with their rifles. He fainted and was taken to the hospital by other students. He told the WSWS: "I am sad about the attacks on our lecturers and vice chancellor. We are concerned about the military not observing the MoU [ceasefire agreement]. We can live peacefully only by both sides observing the MoU," he said.

Vice Chancellor Mohandas told a press conference at the campus on Monday that the security forces had carried out a "politically motivated military attack". He urged the government to remove a military post near Jaffna University on the grounds that a "peaceful environment is necessary for functioning of an important educational institution".

On Tuesday, however, the violence continued. About 100 soldiers and police entered Jaffna University at about noon to break up a protest. Tear gas and bullets were fired and students attacked. Troops arrested physical education teacher M. Ilampirayan, and a student, Gowri Senthil. Although the army claimed it had only fired shots into the air, WSWs correspondents saw bullet holes in the walls of university buildings.

Later in the day, a protest by three-wheeler taxi drivers along Kasthuriar road in Jaffna town was also broken up by the army. They were demonstrating against an earlier attack by soldiers at Irupalai, five kilometres from Jaffna. Some of their vehicles had been damaged in that incident.

The university protest developed in response to military operations last week. Troops cordoned off and randomly searched several places on the Jaffna peninsula, including Ariyalai, Myilankadu, Erlalai North, Mandan and Mandathivu. Several young people were arrested and later released. On December 15, the offices of the pro-LTTE Jaffna-based Tamil daily *Namathu Eelanadu* was searched and its staff questioned by the military.

In another incident on December 18, the navy attacked villagers on Punguduthive Island who were protesting against the suspected rape and murder of 20-year-old Ilayathambi Tharshani by naval personnel. After going missing, Tharshani's body was later found in an abandoned well within a nearby military high security zone. Locals have long complained about the military's harassment of young women. As an angry crowd denounced the navy and demanded the removal of the security zone, naval forces opened fire. Several people, including a 55-year-old man, were wounded.

Sri Lanka's new president Mahinda Rajapakse has refused to condemn Monday's shootings at Jaffna University but announced only that he had ordered a full report. His response is in line with his alliance during last month's presidential election campaign with two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which oppose the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE.

One of Rajapakse's first actions on assuming office was to appoint General Sarath Fonseka, known for his hard-line stance on the LTTE, as the army commander. Following the killing of 14 soldiers between December

4 and 6 in Jaffna, Fonseka ordered the army to reconsolidate its control in the north and east. Shootings and reprisals between the LTTE and the military or its armed proxies have been going on for more than a year, particularly in the east.

At a press conference on December 6, Fonseka declared: "We have given orders to the soldiers to make sure they use their arms for self-defence". The shooting of unarmed demonstrators this week demonstrated the real meaning of these words. The military is provocatively trampling on the basic democratic rights of the Tamil minority and setting the stage for a return to war.



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