

Sri Lankan security forces conduct massive sweep of Tamils in Colombo

**Our correspondents
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In a flagrant violation of basic democratic rights, calculated to inflame communal tensions, Sri Lanka's security forces launched a massive cordon and search operation against Tamil residents of the capital Colombo on December 31.

Entire neighbourhoods were sealed off and nearly a thousand Tamils were arrested and held incommunicado for hours after the terrifying pre-dawn raids. Houses were ransacked, people were searched and detainees were systematically fingerprinted, footprinted, photographed and videotaped. By the end of the day, most were released, but 53 remained in custody.

It was the first major anti-Tamil crackdown in Colombo since the signing of a 2002 ceasefire agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Security forces sought to justify the operation in the vaguest manner, with deputy inspector-general of police Pujith Jayasundara claiming it was aimed at "preventing future LTTE attacks and to ensure the security of Colombo".

Coupled with escalating violence in the island's northeast, the huge police and military mobilisation has heightened fears that the country is once again heading toward war.

"Operation Strangers Night III" involved 2,000 military personnel and 2,400 policemen, all heavily armed, in 15 predominantly Tamil suburbs. These included Pettah, Fort and Maradana, Wellawatta, Bambalapitiya, Dematagoda, Kotahena, Borella, Kirulapona, Modera, Maligawatta, Narahenpita and Kolonnawa.

All roads and access to these areas were sealed off for seven hours, from 4.30 a.m., with residents barred from leaving. Students were stopped from attending Saturday

classes, shopkeepers could not start their New Year business and no one could go shopping for the evening festival. Newspaper deliveries were halted until noon.

Security squads entered houses, demanded identification papers and searched homes, supposedly looking for "explosives or weapons". They arrested anyone suspicious, unable to identify themselves or who could not provide reasons for staying in Colombo. Youth were particularly targetted and among those detained, more than a hundred were women. Detainees were taken to eight police centres and subjected to interrogation, while police stations were crammed with parents and relatives waiting for their release.

According to Deputy Inspector-General Jayasundara, five people were taken into custody as "LTTE suspects" and placed under detention orders "until the conclusion of investigations". But police admitted that no explosives or weapons were found. These detentions are a direct attack on political and civil rights. Military personnel exploited the wide powers granted under a state of emergency declared following the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August.

Amid rising tensions in the North and East, the Colombo media has conducted an inflammatory campaign, quoting unnamed security officers saying that the LTTE had earmarked key economic institutions, security establishments and other important places for attacks. Some reports cited exact numbers of LTTE agents who had supposedly infiltrated Colombo, raising the obvious question of why these agents were not located in the crackdown.

Jayasundara claimed that intelligence reports had showed the LTTE was planning to assassinate several political leaders, including President Mahinda Rajapakse. He told reporters that the armed forces would intensify the search operations.

Rajapakse's newly appointed army commander, General Sarath Fonseka, and the president's defence adviser, Kotakedeniya, a former police deputy inspector general and a leader of the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), have insisted on such search operations.

Over the past month, police have also called for the reintroduction of the repressive and discriminatory regime that applied before the ceasefire. Hundreds of Tamils, especially youth, were detained for years without trial under emergency laws. Anyone unable to produce a national identity card could be detained as a LTTE member. Tamil residents of Colombo had to register their details at local police stations.

Media coverage of the December 31 operation suggested that the raids were conducted "cordially" with "little inconvenience" to residents. But people who spoke to the WSWs provided harrowing accounts. Some said the operation was reminiscent of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms that triggered the civil war.

A Wellawatta resident said: "Early in the morning, at about 3.30, I heard someone knocking at my door. When I opened the door, heavily armed police and army personnel were standing there. They asked how many people were staying in the house. My wife and children were afraid and my small son started to cry.

"The officers were shouting at my wife and daughter and asking for identity cards. My 15-year-old son was threatened repeatedly because he could not produce an ID card. How could he, when cards are only issued at the age of 18?

"Even after we gave them our identity cards, they didn't stop. They went inside and searched the house for about 45 minutes. When we could not open a cupboard door we were abused with filthy words. They threatened us, saying, 'go and tell this to Prabhakaran [the LTTE leader]'. I heard one officer telling another, 'we should chase these fellows to the North even without clothes, just as Muslim people were chased away [by the LTTE] from the North."

"We are afraid that war may erupt at any moment. If it does, search operations will continue like they used to during the civil war. We felt a little bit of freedom when the ceasefire was in force. If the war resumes, everyone in this country, Tamils and Sinhalese alike, will suffer equally.

"During the presidential election campaign, certain

leaders—especially from the JVP and JHU—spread communal feelings among the Sinhala public once again. Now they are silent about the incidents going on."

Luxmi, a pregnant mother and an Indian citizen, said: "The security forces stopped and surrounded my vehicle as I was going to see my doctor. There were hundreds of soldiers—it looked like a war situation. Since I am an Indian national, I speak only English and Tamil. My driver, who is a Sri Lankan Tamil, was trying to explain. They chased him away and demanded ID from me. I showed them a copy of my Indian passport but they refused to accept it.

"Four officers surrounded me, pointing their guns at me. I was nervous and did not know what to do. Fortunately I had my mobile and phoned my husband to come with the original passport. They warned me that if there was any delay, they would take me to the police station."

A Dehiwala resident said: "Our bus was stopped and all the Tamil people were asked to get out. It reminded me of the 1983 communal violence, which I experienced personally. I was terrified. We faced over half an hour of questioning. An officer abused me in Sinhala, alleging that I gave rooms to 'Tigers to play in Colombo'. But I am not a member or supporter of the LTTE."



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