

Escalating killing of civilians and army harassment in northern Sri Lanka

Our correspondent
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In the war zones in the East and North of Sri Lanka, there is a rising toll of unsolved “disappearances” and murders of Tamil civilians as the government and the military prepare for a renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Despite denials, it is not credible that the armed forces and police, which enforce stringent security measures in these areas, are not colluding with the pro-government paramilitaries in killing suspected LTTE sympathisers.

The latest spate of murders took place on Saturday night. Unidentified gunmen killed 13 people in three separate incidents on small islets off the northern Jaffna peninsula. On Allaipiddy island, thugs broke into the house of S. Amalathas, lobbed a grenade and opened fire on the occupants. Eight people, including a baby and a four-year-old child, died on the spot. Navy personnel only allowed three of the injured to be taken to hospital after being ordered to do so by a local magistrate. One later died in hospital.

The official accounts are riddled with contradictions. Initially, the navy issued a statement declaring its personnel had only opened fire after being attacked by grenades. Later navy spokesman D.K.P. Dassanayake denied any involvement at all, stating that “at night we are confined to our camp on the islet”. Without offering any evidence, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella suggested that the LTTE was killing Tamil civilians to divert international condemnation from its role in a sea battle on May 11.

Evidence points to the navy’s complicity in the murders. Locals told the *World Socialist Web Site* that it is impossible to enter or move about on any of the islets, including Allaipiddy, without attracting the navy’s attention. The navy has strict controls throughout the area, often ordering people to demolish boundary walls and palm leaf fences and preventing the

cultivation of vegetables on spurious grounds of “security”.

Four more people were killed on the same day. Gunmen entered a house on the islet of Velanai and killed three people, including an elderly man and woman, aged 72 and 65 respectively. Another man was shot dead inside his house in Vangalady. His parents and brother narrowly escaped the same fate by running for cover.

In another provocation, gunmen set fire to the office of Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MP Selavarajah Kajendren in Jaffna town on May 13. The MP accused soldiers of entering the premises and destroying millions of rupees worth of property, including books belonging to the International Students Association of Tamil Eelam. The TNA is a pro-LTTE coalition of Tamil parties.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has ordered an investigation into Saturday’s killings. But the inquiry is just one more in a growing list, designed to deflect attention from the government and the military and to cover up for the culprits. None of the official investigations have resulted in the arrest or charging of anyone connected to the armed forces or their allied paramilitaries.

The murders on Saturday are the latest in a long series of unsolved cases.

* On April 18, five people were killed at Vatharavthai, 13 kilometres from Jaffna. One person told WSWs reporters that his brother and a group of friends had been dropping one of the group at home. On their return, they were stopped, severely tortured and killed. While the army has denied any knowledge or involvement, locals pointed out that the murderers would have had to pass through a number of checkpoints, as the road is a closely guarded supply

route for a nearby army camp.

* On April 27, five decapitated bodies were found in the Avissawella area near Colombo. Relatives have identified two of the bodies and all five appeared to be Tamils. One was S. Sukumar, a trishaw driver, and the second person was about to go abroad to work. The five appear to have been tortured before being killed, beheaded and dumped. The killings took place in the midst of a dragnet by police and soldiers of Tamil areas in the city following a suicide bombing at army headquarters in central Colombo on April 25. A police inquiry ordered by Rajapakse has produced no arrests.

* On May 4, soldiers near Nelliady near Jaffna town fired rocket-propelled grenades at two three-wheeler vehicles, killing seven young people. The army claimed that the youth were LTTE members who had just attacked their camp. In a letter to foreign embassies in Colombo, however, the TNA gave details of the victims and explained that they had been travelling to a party at a friend's house when the army camp was attacked. The TNA accused the army of arbitrary retaliation against innocent civilians.

* On May 6 at Manthuvil East on the Jaffna peninsula, eight youth disappeared while working at a Hindu temple. Locals blamed soldiers stationed at a brigade headquarters at Varani, three kilometres from the temple. Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission officials, who visited the area on May 9, found bloodstains, some clothes and four empty cartridges. The army has denied any involvement. No bodies have been found.

Concerned at the angry reaction to the disappearances, the defence ministry imposed an extensive curfew on Jaffna for May 8 and closed the main north-south A9 road linking Vavuniya to Jaffna through government- and LTTE-controlled areas. Despite these measures, protests took place on the Jaffna peninsula on May 9, shutting shops, schools and government offices and halting transport. Hundreds of people demonstrated near the Varani camp.

The demonstrations were not the first. On May 4, students, shopkeepers and workers joined a general shutdown in protest over an attack on the offices of the pro-LTTE newspaper *Uthayan* on May 1 that resulted in the death of two employees. The gunmen were widely believed to belong to a pro-government paramilitary group.

There is widespread hostility and anger among the Tamil minority over the repressive activities of the security forces. The deaths and disappearances are just the tip of the iceberg. Police and soldiers routinely harass, intimidate and abuse the Tamil population. Hundreds have been rounded up in recent weeks in the military's cordon and search operations and held for questioning as "LTTE suspects".

People on the islet of Karainagar near Jaffna told the WSWS they were under virtual siege. The navy, which has a major base on the island, has imposed tight controls. On May 4, the navy ordered local fishermen not to go to sea and seized their fishing nets and boats. Ten people were beaten with sticks when they protested. When one woman asked how they were going to feed themselves, she was contemptuously told to "write to [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran". About 150 families have been severely affected by the loss of any earnings.

The activities of the security forces are so brazen that Ananda Sangaree, a pro-government MP from Jaffna, was compelled to write to the police last week to appeal for the release of his driver. Sangaree told the WSWS that on February 12 his driver had gone searching for his children after hearing gunshots and was detained. He is still in custody.

The government's attitude to the latest round of killings was highlighted by the comments of President Rajapakse in last weekend's *Sunday Times*, excusing the activities of the security forces. "I know there have been allegations of violations by the armed forces and the police," he said. "But they are relatively less.... Can any of these be compared with the attempt on the life of the Commander of the Sri Lankan Army." Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka was nearly killed in the April 25 suicide bombing at army headquarters.

What Rajapakse is condoning are the preparations for war. The mounting violence by the military and associated militias is calculated to provoke the LTTE, undermine the all but defunct 2002 ceasefire agreement and cut across any effort to revive peace talks.



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