

# Bomb blast kills 64 villagers and catapults Sri Lanka toward war

**K. Ratnayake**  
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A powerful landmine blast killed 64 passengers and injured at least 80 travelling on a bus to the town of Kebitigollewa in Sri Lanka's north central province on Thursday morning. This criminal act is a deliberate provocation aimed at destroying what remains of the 2002 ceasefire and plunging the island back toward civil war. Whoever carried out the attack, there is no doubt that the Colombo government and its chauvinist allies are directly responsible for inflaming communal hatreds and creating the political climate in which such an atrocity can take place.

Most of the victims were impoverished Sinhalese farmers and their families, who were travelling to town from neighbouring villages. Among the dead were 15 children. The area, about 240 kilometres from Colombo, borders the war zones of the northern province, significant portions of which are under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The Sri Lankan government immediately blamed the LTTE for the bombing and used it as the pretext to order a series of air raids and artillery barrages on LTTE-controlled territory. While the military claimed the retaliation was a limited deterrent, the attacks began just three hours after mine explosion and continued yesterday.

In the northern province, air force warplanes bombed the outskirts of Kilinochchi, where the LTTE political headquarters is located, and a major LTTE base at Mulaithivu. The LTTE accused the military of targeting Selvapuram, a refugee camp for the victims of the 2004 tsunami disaster, near Mulaithivu. In the eastern province, the army launched a rocket barrage against an LTTE-held area at Muttur. No casualty figures have been given, but the LTTE claimed that houses in a number of villages were damaged.

Both sides recognise that all-out war is imminent. Head of the LTTE peace secretariat S. Pulidevan warned on Friday: "I think the Sri Lankan government by launching the air raids, is showing they are ready for war... Our central command is assessing the situation and our central command will take appropriate action." For its part, the military has not declared when its "deterrent" attacks will stop.

It is unclear at this stage who carried out the Kebitigollewa atrocity. Both sides have blamed the other. The Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire,

declared yesterday that it "could not determine who is behind this brutal act, nor what could be the motive for such a threat to humanity".

The LTTE issued a statement on Thursday condemning the bombing, denying any involvement and accusing "armed elements" who have also been killing Tamil civilians. "The attack in Kebitigollewa, timed to occur immediately after the arrival of the LTTE delegation from Europe, is a reprehensible act of murder with the sole aim of blaming the LTTE for the attack," it declared.

It is, however, possible that the LTTE carried out the attack. The LTTE's declaration that targeting civilians "cannot be justified under any circumstances" is utterly hypocritical. The LTTE is responsible for a long list of vicious attacks on Sinhala and Muslim civilians, which were aimed at deliberately inflaming communal divisions and maintaining its grip over the Tamil masses.

At the same time, it is just as possible that the blast was carried out by elements of the military, associated Tamil paramilitaries or Sinhala chauvinist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which are openly hostile to the 2002 ceasefire. For months, armed outfits such as the Karuna group, in collusion with the military, have carried out assassinations and attacks on LTTE cadre, supporters and Tamil civilians aimed at goading the LTTE into responding.

Sections of the military and Sinhala extremist groups have been agitating against the ceasefire ever since it was signed. The recent escalation of violence can be traced back to the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar last August 12, which was likewise blamed on the LTTE and exploited by the JVP, JHU and the military to whip up pro-war hysteria. No conclusive evidence against the LTTE has ever been released and, as in the Kebitigollewa attack, it is quite possible that those who reaped the political benefits also organised Kadirgamar's murder.

In the aftermath of the Kadirgamar assassination, fresh presidential elections were rapidly called, which were narrowly won by Mahinda Rajapakse with the backing of the JVP and JHU. As the price for their support, Rajapakse agreed to a series of aggressive demands aimed at undermining the already

shaky truce, including the revision of the ceasefire agreement and bolstering of the armed forces. Rajapakse's installation as president was taken as the green light for the acceleration of clandestine attacks in the North and East against the LTTE and its supporters.

Rajapakse visited the injured at the Kebitigollewa hospital on Thursday and appealed for "calm and restraint". He called for the major powers to put more pressure on the LTTE and cynically declared: "We will not let this incident, however barbaric it is, sabotage the peace process." In fact, since assuming office, Rajapakse has set the country on the road to war while posturing as "a man of peace" as part of his government's diplomatic efforts to secure international backing.

An attempt to revive the so-called peace process at talks in Geneva in February almost collapsed after the government delegation called for revisions to the 2002 ceasefire agreement to weaken the LTTE. In the wake of that meeting, the armed forces failed to implement the government's pledge to disarm Tamil paramilitaries operating against the LTTE from government-controlled territory. As a result, the temporary lull in violence rapidly ended, a further round of Geneva negotiations scheduled for April was abandoned and delegations in Oslo for talks on June 8-9 failed to even meet.

Significantly, the Bush administration immediately declared that the Kebitigollewa attack "bore all the hallmarks of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" and demanded that the LTTE "renounce terror and enter into direct negotiations with the Sri Lankan government". Washington has increasingly abandoned any pretence of neutrality and worked to isolate the LTTE internationally, thus encouraging the Rajapakse government as well as the JVP and JHU to act more aggressively against the LTTE.

While Rajapakse preaches about the virtues of "restraint" and "peace" to the press, his parliamentary allies have been clamouring for war. Not surprisingly the president has not criticised or rebuked the JVP or JHU, on which his minority government rests, for their inflammatory propaganda.

Following the Kebitigollewa attack, the JVP political committee issued a statement openly advocating a full-scale offensive against the LTTE. "It is not enough to launch air attacks targeting Tiger camps in response to serious attacks by Tiger terrorists. What is now needed is a planned active program, prepared top to bottom, to defeat Tiger terrorism completely, not a program of limited response."

The statement demanded that the government "abandon foolish hopes in the false [peace] negotiation tables and give priority to defeating terrorism". It called for the administrative separation of the North and East and a military offensive "in the first round to free it [the East] from the influence of Tiger terrorists".

The JVP also demanded the banning of the LTTE and "other organisations that support it directly or indirectly". The move

would effectively outlaw the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance parliamentary faction as well as lay the basis for an intensified campaign of harassment, intimidation and violence against the Tamil minority and anyone opposed to a renewed war.

The JHU statement was even more sinister. It called for national unity to fight terrorism and demanded that the government not negotiate behind the backs of the people with "this terrorist group appealing for peace". The JHU warned that if the government "betrayed the country," the people would take the law into their hands and act to defend themselves. These comments are a barely disguised threat to organise a vicious anti-Tamil pogrom, along the lines of the 1983 carnage that precipitated the civil war.

That Sri Lanka again stands on the precipice of civil war is an indictment, not just of the government, but of the entire political establishment. Organically incapable of satisfying the democratic aspirations and social needs of the vast majority of working people, the parties of the Sri Lankan ruling class have repeatedly resorted to the vile poison of communalism to divide the working class and shore up their own political rule. Confronting a rising tide of strikes and protests over escalating prices and deteriorating living standards, the Rajapakse government is prepared to again plunge the country back to a disastrous war.

This impending catastrophe requires the urgent intervention of the working class, which is the only social force capable of providing a progressive solution to the island's bloody 20-year conflict. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on all workers—Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim—to reject all forms of racism and communalism and to fight to build an independent movement based on an independent socialist and internationalist perspective to meet the needs of all working people for peace, democratic rights and decent living standards.

We urge workers, young people and intellectuals to carefully study the statement entitled "A socialist answer to the danger of war in Sri Lanka" issued on March 11 by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, which calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan troops from the North and East. It details a program for the working class to fight to establish a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the wider struggle for a United Socialist States of South Asia and internationally.



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