In climate of wartime hysteria

Sri Lankan businessman dies after being arrested and tortured

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Sunil Perera, 55, a small businessman from the Colombo suburb of Kotte, died in the National Hospital of Sri Lanka on July 6 after being repeatedly assaulted and beaten by prison officers while on remand. He was arrested on June 28 on charges, which proved to be false, of making a fake warning over the phone that a bomb had been planted at a school.

Perera's arrest and death was not an isolated case or a mistake as the media and police have tried to claim. His brutal treatment was the product of the climate of hysteria, communalism and fear being deliberately whipped up by the government as it intensifies military operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The security forces and the media are creating panic about the dangers of LTTE bombings to justify further inroads into basic democratic rights.

Perera was arrested after the principal and vice principal at Mihindu Maha Vidyalaya school in Ratnapura complained to police of receiving a call warning of an impending explosion. The police detained the businessman and his employee Gamini Munaweera, claiming the latter's cell phone had been used to make the call. The arrests were made even though Munaweera, on hearing of the complaint, went to his local police station to demonstrate that his phone could not have been used.

Munaweera told the WSWS that, from the outset, he and his employer had been treated as guilty and denigrated as traitors. After their arrest, officers at the police station had abused them as *Sinhala Koti* or Sinhalese members of the LTTE. When dragged before a magistrate's court, the police and prosecution prevented defence lawyers from even speaking by screaming that the case was a matter of "national security" and demanding that the two be remanded in custody.

The court remanded Perera and Munaweera to Kuruwita prison until July 4. As the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) noted, the two were arrested by the police, and also remanded, "without sufficient evidence".

According to Munaweera, as soon as the pair arrived at the prison, they were accused of being traitors and the beatings began. Munaweera was slapped and hit in the stomach. The two were forced to kneel, then hit with sticks. Being diabetic and physically weak, the treatment seriously affected Perera who had to be taken back to his prison ward with the help of others. The torture continued the next day with warders using a belt to hit the pair.

Perera's wife, Chitra Perera, provided bills and documents to police on June 30 from the private cell-phone operator to prove that her husband had not made any calls to the school. He had only phoned the school in April to discuss a business deal to supply helium-filled balloons for a festival.

Chitra told the WSWS she was shocked when she saw her husband at the prison on July 1. "The person who walked into the police station and into the courts, was brought to me [carried] on the shoulders of two inmates. He was semi-conscious and did not recognise me," she said.

The court finally ordered the release of the two men on July 3 but prison authorities held him for another day on the pretext of verifying the order. Police told the courts they had made a mistake due to a "technical fault" involving the "call line identification" mechanism for the phone. The police had not bothered

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to check the evidence even after Perera and Munaweera pleaded not guilty.

After his release, Perera was admitted to the Colombo general hospital on the evening of July 4. He never fully recovered consciousness and died two days later. After a postmortem, the judicial medical officer issued an open verdict signifying that the death should be investigated. The *Daily Mirror* reported on July 8: "Doctors at the hospital noted that Sunil was suffering from a severe trauma as a result of his ordeal in the prison."

Perera's wife also suspects medical negligence. "Sunil is a diabetic patient. I gave the medicine to a prison official, but I am not sure it was given to him," she said. Requests to prison officials to admit Perera to a government hospital were turned down.

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) is to investigate whether the beatings in prison led to Perera's death. Such police inquiries are notorious for suppressing facts and covering up for authorities.

Perera's death has exposed the criminal character of the communal hysteria being whipped up by the government, the media and security forces. Without any real evidence, Perera and Munaweera were vilified, persecuted and physically abused as LTTE agents.

According to a front page article in *Lakbima* on June 30, Senior Deputy Inspector General Jayanatha Wickramaratna told the media that the two were members of a sabotage group who phoned schools with bomb threats to create panic among students and parents.

Attempts were also made to use the arrests against the opposition United National Party (UNP). The *Lakbima* article claimed that the two were close confidantes of a politician, hinting this was the UNP's work. The state-owned TV station *Rupavahini* broadcast a similar report. Munaweera told the police that he had contested provincial council elections on the UNP ticket in the mid-1990s but had not been politically active since 1997.

The arrest of Perera and Munaweera took place amid an escalating clandestine war against the LTTE by the military and its paramilitary allies following the election of Mahinda Rajapakse last November. The provocative campaign resulted in a LTTE suicide bombing on April 25 at the army headquarters in central Colombo that nearly claimed the life of army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka and a subsequent attack on June 26 that killed Lieutenant General Parami Kulatunga.

Rajapakse's Sinhala chauvinist allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—exploited each attack to press for war against the LTTE and repressions against "traitors" in the south—that is, anyone who does not support their communal politics. Without defeating the *Sinhala Koti*, they declare, it is impossible to wage war against the LTTE.

In this political climate, a scare campaign in the media claimed that the LTTE was intending to bomb schools. On June 18, *Lakbima* published a front-page story entitled "Next attack may be aimed at school children. Defence intelligence exposes." On June 26, the same newspaper carried another story headed, "One hour search operation in all schools," reporting that Education Minister Susil Premajayantha had issued a circular to implement a new security program in schools.

The LTTE issued a statement denying that it had any intention of bombing schools. However, following the death of Kulatunga, panicked parents took their children out of school on June 28, forcing dozens of schools to close. It was in the midst of this campaign of lies that Perera and Munaweera were arrested on false charges, remanded and tortured.

On August 2, the Supreme Court gave leave to Perera's widow to proceed with a fundamental rights petition alleging that the actions of the prison authorities contributed to her husband's death. The court will hear the petition on November 24.

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