

Muslims protest against police massacre in eastern Sri Lanka

K. Ratnayake
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Protests continued for the third day yesterday in the Pottuvil area of eastern Sri Lanka over the murder of 10 young Muslim workers. While the government attempted to blame the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), locals have accused members of the elite police commando unit, the Special Task Force (STF), of being responsible.

Eleven workers went to repair an irrigation sluice gate at Rattal Kulam in Pottuvil on Sunday but did not return. The bodies of 10 of them were found the following day near the sluice gate. They had been brutally hacked to death. Meera Mohideen, 55, escaped but was severely injured and is now in the intensive care unit of Amparai hospital.

M.S. Mohideen, one of 2,000 people gathered near the Jumma mosque, where the bodies were being kept before burial, told Reuters: "Special Task Force troops killed these people. We don't blame anyone else. The LTTE can't come into this area. It is completely controlled by the STF. Without the STF's knowledge, no one can come into this area."

There has been a general shutdown of shops and businesses in the area since Monday. Protesters are demanding the removal of the nearby police camp at Sasthiriveli or the transfer of the commando unit, as well as a full investigation of the crime. The Sasthiriveli camp is just 350 metres from where the bodies were found.

Local people mobbed the vehicle of Inspector General of Police Chandra Fernando, who flew in to review the situation. Government ministers A.H.M. Fowzie and Hussain Baila, along with Western Province Governor Alavi Moulana, rushed to the area to appeal for calm but to no avail.

On Tuesday, 15,000 people gathered outside the Jumma mosque and protests occurred in several other

parts of the Amparai district. Tamils also took part in the campaign. In a desperate attempt to end the protests, Fowzie visited the area again and gave 100,000 rupees [\$US1,000] to each of the victims' families.

On Wednesday, Muslims at Periya Ullai blocked a STF vehicle on its way to deal with protesters in Pottuvil. In the ensuing clash, police commandos opened fire, injuring 14 people, including four seriously. Police clamped a curfew on the area until Thursday morning in a bid to suppress further demonstrations.

The immediate reaction of the government and security forces was to blame the LTTE. Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared there was ample evidence to prove the LTTE's involvement. He dismissed allegations that the STF was responsible and praised the police commandos. The LTTE has issued a statement denying any involvement.

Rambukwella rejected a call by Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem for an international inquiry, declaring: "Sri Lanka has the expertise to carry out a full probe." Hakeem met with locals in Pottuvil on Monday and reiterated to the media their allegations that the STF was responsible. He announced that he would meet UN officials to press the case for an international investigation.

Hakeem's proposal reflects the lack of public confidence in the police to carry out an impartial inquiry. Over the past year, there has been a growing list of killings and "disappearances" in the North and East of the island, in which the security forces have been implicated. The government has promised inquiries, but no member of the security forces has been charged and prosecuted.

The protests against the police are politically significant. The LTTE has in the past been responsible for outrages against Muslims in the East of the island, which in turn have been used by successive Colombo governments to stir up hostility between Muslims and Tamils. As well as pointing to police involvement in the murders, the protests point to a breakdown of communal barriers, amid widespread anger over the brutal methods of the military.

The murder of Muslim workers followed a series of offensives by the military against the LTTE, particularly in the East. On the orders of President Mahinda Rajapakse, the army launched a major operation to seize the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate, inside LTTE territory south of Trincomalee, in clear breach of the 2002 ceasefire. Since then, the security forces have captured LTTE bases in the Sampur area across the bay from Trincomalee harbour.

Bitter fighting took place for control of the predominantly Muslim town of Muttur in earlier August. LTTE fighters seized parts of the town in an effort to cut the army's supply lines to Mavilaru. The military responded with a savage barrage of artillery and rocket attacks, driving tens of thousands of residents from the town. After the army retook Muttur, 17 local aid workers, mainly Tamils, were found dead on August 5. They had been killed execution-style. While the military blamed the LTTE, the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission, which oversees the ceasefire, ruled that the army was responsible.

Two days later, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas was shot dead in another execution-style killing at his home in the nearby rural town of Mullipothana. All the evidence points to the army's involvement in his murder. The SEP and the WSWs are conducting an international campaign to demand a full investigation of the crime and the prosecution of Mariyadas's killers. (See: "Sri Lankan SEP demands full investigation into murder of Sivapragasam Mariyadas")

The spate of killings is no accident. The government and the military are seeking to retake substantial areas of the eastern province from the LTTE, calculating that its fighting forces were decisively weakened by a major split in its ranks in 2004. Former LTTE commander V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, broke away and has since collaborated closely with the army in

attacking the LTTE. Over the past two days, the air force has intensified its raids on LTTE camps near the eastern town of Batticaloa.

The intensified fighting has been accompanied by a campaign of repression aimed at terrorising the entire population in the North and East. According to residents in Pottuvil, the STF, together with Sinhala chauvinist parties such as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), are deliberately trying to stir up communal tensions to divide the local population. The murder of the 10 workers may well have been calculated to further this aim.

One local told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "This is an area where Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims have lived in harmony and are seeking to live in harmony. The STF, particularly its chief in the area, has taken the initiative in this [crime]. That is why people are demanding its removal.

"The JVP and JHU are supporting the STF. These two organisations are completely hostile to Muslims. They want to break up any unity among the people. In early 2005, with the support of these people, a Buddha statue was erected in Ullai. This heightened communal tensions. This war is designed to break our unity. We all want to live together."



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