

Sri Lankan government imposes police state measures in Colombo

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As fighting has intensified between the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north and east of Sri Lanka, the government has imposed drastic security measures throughout the country, including in the capital Colombo.

The measures are not simply directed at silencing criticism of the government's war agenda. Capitalising on a media-assisted atmosphere of fear, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is also intent on intimidating opposition to the continued deterioration of living standards, which has produced a wave of strikes.

Colombo is virtually under siege. Armed soldiers and intelligence officers have been deployed at all main entry points to the city centre, as well as at checkpoints that have mushroomed within the city and on constant patrols. Carrying a national identity card has become a must. Even with an identity card, Tamils, particularly youth, are often detained for questioning.

Frequent night and dawn house searches are being conducted, especially in areas like Kotahena and Wellawatte, traditionally known as Tamil areas.

Troops often block streets even during rush hours, subjecting workers and school children to aggressive questioning and causing lengthy delays. Committees for school security are being formed to check students and their bags. Anyone who resists or objects runs the risk of being branded as "uncooperative" and penalised.

Addressing the press in late August, government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said the public, together with the security forces, had to remain on high alert "when dealing with a terrorist organisation such as the LTTE, [because] we do not know what to expect". In order to sustain the prevailing mood of panic, he further insisted, "[the] safety in

Colombo city is not fully guaranteed".

Daily barrages of newspaper and TV advertisements appeal for people to "collaborate and coordinate" with the armed forces in the name of "responsibility", "national security" and "the defence of the motherland". Large posters at key traffic junctions display relaxed security personnel posing with ordinary people, under the slogan "together for all".

The creators of the media campaign told the daily *Lankadeepa* on September 10 that they were seeking to "dwindle the division between the people and the armed forces and to unite the two of them".

On the pretext of "security maintenance," frequent searches are being conducted in the capital and the neighbouring Western Province. On September 10, hundreds of soldiers and police arrested 193 people during an operation from early morning until noon in Gampaha, Kalaniya and greater Colombo. The police have not disclosed any details of who was detained.

Two days later, 33 Tamil youth were reportedly arrested in search operations conducted in the Colombo and Kaluthura districts.

The government has also launched a campaign to compile extensive information on all Colombo residents, business establishments and workplaces. Colombo Deputy Inspector General of Police Pujitha Jayasundara said the information would be fed into a central database maintained by the Presidential Secretariat.

"We are doing this to ensure civilian security and for the welfare of the community at large, and in an emergency this data can be accessed by the authorities," Jayasundara told the *Nation*. According to the newspaper, the purpose is to "curb sly entry" by LTTE supporters.

In reality, it will provide an exhaustive database to

the security forces, the government and their associated thugs to target, harass and terrorise political opponents as well as the Tamil minority. The military is already implicated in a series of murders and disappearances in the North and East.

An exhaustive 17-page trilingual (Sinhalese, Tamil and English) booklet entitled *A survey to ensure civil security and welfare of the community* asks residents to supply details of all individuals in their household as well as their relationship to one another, including tenants. Details required include title, religion, civil status, ethnicity, age, occupation and workplace.

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The booklet asks whether any portion of the residence is rented. It also asks about non-Sri Lankan citizens—questions that could well be used to target visiting Tamil emigrants, who previously fled the country due to the protracted civil war.

None of this information is relevant for police records. It is also popularly regarded as unnecessary, given the already extensive police raids in poor and Tamil areas, which have been under close surveillance by the security agencies for years.

Speaking to WSWS reporters, Tamil residents from Colombo condemned the measures. A retired public servant, 72, said he had never seen anything like the data collection, and suspected “a hidden agenda”.

A textile dealer, who has worked in Pettah for 30 years, said he had been harassed in a number of search operations. He explained angrily what happened during a recent raid on his home.

“The security personnel went directly to my daughters' bedrooms. My daughters had no time to change their nightdresses. Seeing my son, they asked him to stand facing the wall keeping his hands on it until the search was over. My wife cried, fearing harm to our children. So they scolded my wife in filthy language, telling her to direct her complaints to Prabhakaran (the LTTE leader).

“They put the mattresses down, pulled out all the pillows, opened every cupboard and asked how we obtained our jewelry. They also checked the family album and asked about one of my sons—whose photo was there—who lives abroad. They took one of his photos. When will this end? The government says soldiers will move among the people politely. Only we

know how polite they are. Other Tamils have similar experiences.”

The purpose of such operations is to terrorise ordinary people while seeking to instigate communal hatred, especially in working class areas where Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims live side by side. While the campaign is being carried out in the name of suppressing “Tiger terrorists”, the government is seeking to divide workers and stifle any opposition to its renewed war and savage assault on social conditions.



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