

Protest against killing and abductions in Sri Lanka

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Several hundred people took part in a protest in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo last Wednesday against the country's rising number of abductions and murders. Most victims have been young Tamils and are believed to have been abducted or killed by the military and its paramilitary allies as it intensifies the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Many of the protesters were relatives and carried pictures of those who had been abducted. They shouted slogans including "the government is responsible for the abductions" and "give us back the disappeared". The rally at Fort railway station in central Colombo demanded that the government end the abductions and investigate the cases of hundreds of missing and murdered people. It was organised by the Committee for Tracing the Abducted—a coalition of Tamil parliamentarians and antiwar groups.

The government and the military have denied any responsibility for the killings and disappearances, but the evidence of eyewitnesses and released abductees points to the involvement of the security forces. The assailants have been dressed in plain clothes, armed with sophisticated weapons and came in white vans. The use of white vans was a hallmark of the army's death squads in the late 1980s when it unleashed a reign of terror, killing thousands of rural Sinhalese youth.

Hundreds of young people have been killed or abducted this year. The International Committee of the Red Cross has received more than 350 complaints of abductions throughout the country over the past 10 months. The Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission has received 419 complaints in the nine months up to September.

There have been at least 38 abductions in Colombo and nearby areas this year. Of these cases, 12 murders

have been confirmed. The city and surrounding suburbs are heavily patrolled by security forces which have checkpoints on all of the major roads. Yet none of the abductions has been stopped nor those responsible arrested. The only conclusion that one can draw is that the culprits were known to the military and allowed through the roadblocks.

At Kottawa, 20 kilometres from Colombo, David Vikneswaran, 35, and his wife Thirukeswary Vikneswaran, 30, were kidnapped October 25. Their bullet-riddled bodies were found near Kottawa on the same day. Both were teachers at a private Montessori school. That night Regi Balanathan, 30, was seized at Aluthmawatha in Colombo city and shot dead. His body was dumped on the roadside in the Ragama area.

The most recent cases in the capital include the disappearance of cab driver Sakthivel Thiagarajah, 25, from Grand Pass in central Colombo on October 28. His vehicle was later found at Peliyagoda, near Colombo, abandoned. On the same day, a young Tamil woman from Crow Island in north Colombo also disappeared. Marimuthu Subramaniam, 55, from Kotahena was abducted on October 30.

The arrest of Poobalpillai Kantharajah in late September has implicated the pro-government paramilitaries in the abductions. Kantharajah was detained by the Kotahena police in Colombo as he tried to collect ransom money from the son of kidnapped businessman Sathasivam Kumarasamy. He confessed to being a member of the "Karuna group," a LTTE breakaway outfit that now collaborates with the army against the LTTE. A spokesman for the Karuna group also admitted that Kantharajah was one of their members.

Despite these statements, the government still claimed, without providing any evidence, that

Kantharajah was an LTTE member. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse dismissed growing evidence of kidnappings declaring that “certain abductions [were] carried out with the intention of tarnishing the good image of the Government and law enforcement authorities.”

The police later raided a safe house in a residential area of Thalangama, on the outskirts of Colombo, where Kantharajah had kept his victims. According to the *Sunday Leader*, several residents complained to local police about suspicious activities at the house. But they had been told that no one should worry as those in the house were members of Karuna group.

As last week’s protest indicated, the abductions and murders are fuelling growing anger and concern. International and Sri Lankan human rights groups, including Amnesty International and the UN Human Rights Commission, have condemned the kidnappings and killings and called for an investigation.

The cold-blooded killing of 17 aid workers connected to the French-based Action Contre la Faim (ACF) in early August provoked international outrage. The murders took place after the military recaptured the eastern town of Muttur which the LTTE had temporarily overrun. Ulf Henricsson, then head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), ruled on August 30 that the military were responsible for the murders.

The Socialist Equality Party and WSWs are conducting an international campaign to demand the arrest and prosecution of the murderers of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas. He was killed at his home in Mullipothana near Trincomalee on the evening of August 7. Strong circumstantial evidence points to the involvement of the security forces.

The purpose of all of these abductions and murders is to intimidate the population, particularly Tamils, as the government and the military intensify the civil war. Above all, the terror campaign is directed against political opponents of the war, like Mariyadas.



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