

Two bus bombs kill more than 20 in Sri Lanka

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Two separate bus bombings in Sri Lanka last Friday and Saturday have killed and injured scores of people, including children and women.

The first attack on January 5 took place at Nittambuwa, 32 kilometres north east of Colombo killing 6 people and wounding about 50. The bus was ripped apart by the blast and caught fire. The death toll rose to seven on Sunday after one of the injured died. Less than 24 hours after the first blast, a second bomb exploded on a bus travelling south from Colombo near the town of Hikkaduwa. Fifteen people died in the explosion and more than 40 were injured.

The government, the military and police immediately blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the atrocities and imposed stringent security measures. Nittambuwa police rounded up 24 “suspects” straight after the bombing and another 13 in a dragnet operation on Sunday. Most of the detainees were Tamils. Groups of vigilantes have been activated to search buses and passengers.

Media rumours fed by the police initially claimed that suicide bombers had been involved. Deputy inspector general Jayantha Gamage declared that the second bomb was believed to have been in a woman’s lap when set off. Such stories have been used to fuel the communal hysteria being whipped up by the press and the government. Suicide bombings are the LTTE’s hallmark.

Government analysts, however, have since ruled out suicide bombings. In the first case, the explosion was caused by a high-powered time bomb placed under the rear seat of the bus. In the second, police announced that the device was a time bomb placed in the luggage rack of the bus.

The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the all-but-defunct 2002 ceasefire between

government and the LTTE, issued two statements expressing “deep concern” over rising civilian casualties but did not blame the attacks directly on the LTTE.

LTTE military spokesman Rasiah Ilanthiraiyan denied any responsibility for the bombings. “We have no connection with those incidents. Civilian lives were lost, so naturally anyone would condemn these things,” he told the media. Such statements cannot be taken at face value. The LTTE has previously targetted Sinhala and Muslim civilians, justifying its communal attacks by blaming ordinary working people for the crimes of the Sri Lankan government and military.

Since winning office in November 2005, President Mahinda Rajapakse has escalated military attacks on the LTTE. Last July he gave the go-ahead for offensive operations to seize LTTE-held territory in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. Far from criticising the Sri Lankan government, the US and other major powers have tacitly supported the renewed operations, which have included air attacks that have killed scores of civilians.

It is certainly possible that the LTTE carried out the two bus bombings as a form of retaliation. Following an air strike on January 2 that resulted in the deaths of 16 civilians in Mannar district, LTTE spokesman Seevaratnam Puleedevan warned of “serious repercussions”. But the LTTE is not the only possible culprit. The military and its allied Tamil paramilitaries are quite capable of carrying out such outrages to further fuel a climate of pro-war hysteria in Colombo.

Whoever was responsible, the atrocities have been immediately seized upon to whip up communal hatreds, to justify the renewed war against the LTTE and to introduce repressive new measures against the population as a whole.

President Rajapakse called a meeting on Saturday of top military officials and police to discuss new security arrangements. According to the *Daily Mirror*, the meeting expressed its determination to continue military operations against the LTTE. The government has ordered tighter checks on passengers and luggage in buses and trains—a measure that will inevitably mean the intensified harassment of Tamils.

Last weekend's *Sunday Times* noted that the government was considering the establishment of a fortified zone similar to that of the US in Baghdad. "Though details of these measures cannot be spelt out for obvious reasons, it could be said that the move will lead to the creation of a Green Zone—a rigidly high security area where tighter security measures will be in force. It will also lead to screening and registration of persons within the zone and the vehicles they own or operate," the newspaper stated.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse told the state-owned *Daily News* that the government was establishing what amounted to vigilante groups. "The Vigilance Committees have already been formed and they have to be reactivated to keep the public more vigilant," he said. These groups will "have the right to arrest any person who they feel suspicious about and to warn the people."

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has seized on the bombings to intensify its chauvinist campaign for an all-out war against the LTTE. A political bureau statement urged the government to continue to attack the LTTE and to "mobilise the entire nation to defeat the terrorism." It reiterated the JVP's demands to ban the LTTE, scrap the 2002 ceasefire agreement, eject the SLMM and abandon Norway as peace mediator.

The bombings have helped the government to divert attention from the military's indiscriminate attacks on civilians in the North and East. On Monday, the army killed three civilians in an artillery barrage that hit a hospital in Vaharai in the East. The army has been engaged in a protracted offensive aimed at seizing the strategic area and splitting the LTTE's military forces.

In his statement, President Rajapakse blamed the bombings on the LTTE, but urged restraint, saying the LTTE was trying to incite a communal backlash. He went on to accuse the LTTE of thwarting the "government's efforts to find a peaceful solution to the grievances of Tamils". Rajapakse's hypocritical

appeals for restraint and peace stand in stark contrast to his record over the past year in unleashing the military on the LTTE.

Last week army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka bluntly stated the military's real aims were to drive the LTTE from the East then to launch an offensive to take control of the North. Far from rebuking the general, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared on Monday that the government, while open to peace talks, would continue to liberate rebel-controlled areas. Asked if peace were possible under such conditions, he declared that "peace is for the people not for the LTTE".

In other words, the government has no intention of ending its renewed war to destroy the LTTE and many more civilians will pay the price.



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