

Mob attacks Sri Lankan antiwar rally

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13 January 2007

A mob led by deputy labour minister Mervyn Silva attacked and broke up an antiwar rally in Sri Lanka on Tuesday. The incident is one more indication of the government's determination to crack down on any opposition to its escalating war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The meeting in the Colombo suburb of Nugegoda was organised by the recently formed United People's Movement (UPM) to protest against the war, state repression and rising prices. The UPM is a broad front and the meeting was to be addressed by a range of speakers from the right-wing United National party (UNP) to the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance and several leftist parties.

Half an hour before the event was due to start, a gang of about 100 armed thugs broke into venue. Journalist Ajith Seneviratne told the BBC Sinhala service: "When I was walking near the stage, someone pointed me out to Mervyn Silva. The junior minister shouted 'beat him up! beat them all!', then the mob started attacking me."

United Socialist Party (USP) leader Siritunga Jayasuriya told a press conference that a notorious drug dealer "Kudu Lal" had also been involved. The thugs were armed with batons and attacked those on the stage. Three journalists were beaten and two cameras smashed. Police present did nothing to prevent the attack.

The meeting's organisers accused President Mahinda Rajapakse of being behind the thuggery. Jayasuriya said the police had contacted him the previous night and asked him to cancel the rally as it could come under attack. Far from bolstering security at the meeting, the police appear to have colluded in the attack.

UNP MP Dayasiri Jayasekera told the media that the defence ministry had ordered police to stop the meeting from taking place. Prior to the meeting, police sealed the main Nugegoda road to traffic and called in the

bomb squad claiming there was a bomb threat. Silva remained after the attack and chatted for some time to police at the scene.

While Silva and his thugs were breaking up the meeting, the fascistic National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT), was distributing a leaflet in the surrounding area denouncing the UPM as a pro-LTTE organisation. According to the NMAT's contorted communal logic, the UPM was coming to the assistance of the LTTE by calling for peace when the army was gaining ground in its offensives.

The attack on the UPM rally is not an isolated incident. On the same day, the police riot squad broke up a picket by employees of the state-owned transport board outside the transport ministry in Colombo. Four union leaders were arrested. Workers were agitating for the payment of salary arrears.

On Monday, the management of the Sri Lanka Telecom, which is partly government-owned, secured a court order against any industrial action by telecommunications unions. Telecom workers were due to strike on Wednesday for higher pay. The company argued that the proposed strike action would cause irreparable damage to the country's economy and national security.

The Rajapakse government, backed by Sinhala extremist parties, is deliberately whipping up a climate of war hysteria to not only to suppress opposition to its military aggression, but also to justify repression against strikes and protests. The accelerating war is being accompanied by a far-reaching assault on basic democratic rights.

In July, as the army commenced its offensives, Rajapakse announced emergency regulations together with an essential services order, which provides for the banning of industrial action in designated industries. In December, the president re-imposed and extended the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act that provides for

lengthy detention without trial.

While formal censorship has not been imposed as yet, the president and military chiefs have both issued warnings to the media not to compromise security. A number of journalists have been murdered in circumstances that point to the collusion of the security forces.

The attack on the antiwar rally is a warning that the government has no intention of relying simply on legal measures, but is quite prepared to resort to mob violence to intimate and terrorise any opposition to its policies.



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