

Sri Lanka: military intelligence involved in “terrorist conspiracy”

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At a press conference in February, the Sri Lankan military boasted that it had broken up a major terrorist conspiracy. Officials played the video taped confessions of three men detained less than 48 hours earlier, admitting to being members of a previously unknown group, the Revolutionary Liberation Organisation (RLO), to having received training and arms from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and to plotting terrorist acts in the south of the island.

These lurid claims were very convenient for the military, which had been under intense local and international pressure over its abuse of democratic rights, including the detention, disappearance and murder of hundreds of people over the past year. The government and Sinhala chauvinist parties, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), immediately seized on the “confessions” as proof that opponents of the country’s renewed civil war were “Sinhala Koti” (Sinhala Tigers)—that is, traitors—and were threatening “national security”.

The three arrested men—Nihal Serasinghe, a typesetter, Lalith Seneviratne, a designer, and Sisira Priyankara, a railway worker—were all involved in *Akuna*, a bi-monthly journal of the Railway Workers Combine (RWC), a trade union body formed a decade ago. Their confessions were used to round up another 30 people in the central plantation districts as RLO members and LTTE collaborators. All of them have been detained without charge under the country’s draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

In a statement last month, the Socialist Equality Party highlighted the dubious character of the case. It noted that the press conference was the first time details had been revealed of any of the many detained “LTTE suspects”. The statement pointed out that the three men were being held incommunicado and thus prevented from explaining the circumstances in which the admissions had been made.

The most striking feature was the speed with which the confessions were extracted. “There are only three possible explanations: the admissions were extracted by torture, or they were the confessions of agents provocateurs, or a combination of the two. In the course of Sri Lanka’s protracted civil war, military intelligence and various police agencies have perfected all of these techniques,” the SEP stated.

Now evidence has emerged confirming that military intelligence had at least one agent planted in the group and was well aware of all of its activities, including attempted bombings. Moreover, top levels of the government and the military, including President Mahinda Rajapakse and his brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is the country’s defence secretary, also knew about the operation.

The information first surfaced in the *Sunday Leader* on March 18 in an investigative article entitled “Hidden hand behind the Sinhala Kotiyas”. The article denounced the military’s use of the case as “part

of a Machiavellian attempt under the guise of crushing terrorism, to suppress media and trade union rights. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that some government politicians are now quick to refer to media institutions that refuse to toe the government line as ‘Media Tigers’ while some go as far as urge offensive against them.”

A further report appeared in the Sinhala-language newspaper *Ravaya*. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters have conducted their own independent inquiries, which confirm the previous accounts.

A central figure in the confessions made public in February was a person known as “Sharmal”, who was named as the leader of the RLO’s “Armed Wing”. According to Seneviratne’s statement, Sharmal was part of two groups that went to Kilinochchi in the LTTE-controlled Vanni for military training in late 2004 and early 2005. “The training [for the first group] lasted for about 7 to 8 days. There, we learnt weapons handling in [a] simple way and exercises.... After some months another three went under the leadership of Sharmal,” he stated.

Seneviratne explained that Sharmal was also in charge of weapons. “The first consignment of weapons sent here [from the LTTE] was given to Sharmal’s custody. Sharmal collected them from the vehicle, which brought them and later hid them somewhere in Makola,” he said. Sharmal was also responsible for at least one failed bombing attempt. “Through Sharmal’s intervention, out of the bombs brought here, [one] was set for a target at Ganemulla road. But that target was missed.”

Now there is strong evidence that Sharmal is a military intelligence agent, who, unlike other people named, has been allowed to remain at large. As a result of the blaze of publicity surrounding the confessions, people in the village of Pahala Biyanwila, 30 kilometres from Colombo, identified Sharmal as none other than local resident Udaya Sharmal Costa, 45.

Some of the local villagers, responding to the government’s chauvinist campaign, began harassing Sharmal’s family. Posters appeared in the village denouncing him. His house was pelted with stones. Graffiti was scrawled on the wall in front of his home that read: “Sinhala Tiger. Sharmal traitor. Drive him out of the village”. Monks at the local Buddhist temple had to intervene to prevent his house being torched.

In an effort to protect Sharmal, a village meeting was held on February 19 at the request of K.R.A. Gunaratne, the officer in charge (OIC) of Kadawata police station, and military intelligence officers. The *Sunday Leader* explained: “The Intelligence Bureau officials along with the OIC, Kadawatha brought Sharmal recently to attend a special meeting held at the Pushparamaya temple. There, the officers explained to the villagers not to be misled and not to take the law into

their own hands by causing destruction to Sharmal's property. They insisted that Sharmal was part of the IB."

A small trader [name withheld] who participated the meeting told the WWS that the officers said Sharmal was an informant for army intelligence. Several people at the meeting said Sharmal was present together with an army intelligence officer in civilian clothes and an armed soldier. The officer said Sharmal had been working for military intelligence for three years—about the same time that the RLO had allegedly been receiving training and arms from the LTTE.

Sharmal had previously been known in the village, not as an LTTE supporter, but as a member of the Sinhala extremist JVP who had been involved in their vicious, fascistic campaign in 1988-90 against the Indo-Lanka Accord. At that time, JVP armed thugs murdered hundreds of political opponents, workers and trade unionists who refused to support their activities. In the course of the temple meeting, the small trader asked how an ex-JVPer, who had been engaged in nefarious activities in the area, could be recruited to military intelligence.

Sharmal also had connections to Iroshan Vithanarachchi, coordinating secretary for a former senior government minister Mangala Samaraweera, sacked by President Rajapakse earlier this year. Both the *Sunday Leader* and *Ravaya* published the transcript of a phone conversation between the two men last month, indicating that Sharmal's activities were known at the highest levels of government. The conversation also involved a military officer who was with Sharmal at the time.

The officer admitted to Iroshan that intelligence officials visited Pahala Biyanwila to protect Sharmal. "[W]e went to the temple, gathered all the devotees and explained the whole situation. Our officers clad in army uniforms went and explained everything. After that, the entire matter got messed up." Asked why the press was saying that Sharmal had been arrested, the officer said: "If we try to ask them to publish corrections, the LTTE will be under the impression that it was him who was the informant all along working with intelligence. That's why we let it [the media] go in this manner."

After being asked about Iroshan's political connections, the officer explained: "It does not matter to which political party you belong. About Sharmal, our defence secretary, the President and even everyone in the defence ministry are aware of the story. It is because we conducted this operation under the instruction of the defence secretary."

According to *Ravaya*, even while publicly distancing himself from the JVP, Sharmal maintained close contacts with senior JVP leaders, including parliamentary leader and propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa. In his conversation with Iroshan, Sharmal explained that a JVP MP had arranged the meeting with Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse. "It was via this JVP member that the government initially went for discussions. It was via this JVP parliamentarian that Goti [Gotabhaya] was arranged."

The story becomes even murkier, as the RLO was allegedly involved in a series of bombings. According to the taped confessions of the three arrested men, these included: a series of small bombs in Colombo and suburbs on January 24, 2006; bombings near Indian Oil Company filling stations at Kiribathgoda and Piliyandala in August, 2006; a claymore mine explosion near the Ganemulla army commando camp on September 10, 2006; an attack on a electric power transformer at Krindiwela; and planting explosives near the southern Koggala free trade zone on November 25 and 26, 2006.

The *Sunday Leader*, which is aligned with opposition parties,

highlighted a failed attempt on the life of former minister, Sripathy Suriyaarachchi, on October 19, 2006. While Suriyaarachchi was part of the Rajapakse government at the time, he and Mangala Samaraweera were already critical of the president's policies. The bomb failed to explode, but in his conversation with Iroshan, Sharmal made clear he was in charge of the operation but that military intelligence officers handled the remote control for triggering the bomb.

Many questions remain about the RLO's activities. Sharmal is not the only former JVP member in the RLO and may not be the only military intelligence agent. A lawyer for the three arrested men told the courts on April 5 that his clients' confessions were obtained by torture. They continue to be held without charge while police inquiries continue.

What is clear that the military has not only known about, but also manipulated, the group's activities for at least three years. All the various bombings, which were routinely blamed on the LTTE, were at the very least known about in advance and in some cases may have been instigated by military intelligence for their own purposes. Yet no official investigation is underway into the involvement of military intelligence, the armed forces and the government in these illegal and provocative actions.

The government seized upon these bombings to whip fear and communal hatred in order to justify its return to war in 2006 and the imposition of anti-democratic measures such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The failed bombing attack on former minister Sripathy Suriyaarachchi is even more sinister, pointing to the possible involvement of the government and military in illegal acts of thuggery and violence, including political murder.

Given that the military had long known about the RLO, the decision to "expose" the plot was a political one taken at the top levels of the state. Now the "exposure" has itself been exposed, the government and the military have stepped in to try to minimise the political damage. Military spokesman Brigadier Samarasinghe, who triumphantly displayed the video taped confessions in February, told the WWS: "There is no such person [as Sharmal] in our units." Not only have villagers in Pahala Biyanwila now been told by police not to speak to the media, but on March 21 hundreds of police and military personnel conducted an early morning sweep through the village to reinforce the message.

The entire RLO affair is a sharp warning to working people of the methods that the Rajapakse government and the military will use to suppress any political opposition to the war and the continuing attacks on living standards.



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