

Death threats against protesters in northern Sri Lanka

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25 May 2007

A clandestine poster pasted on the walls of Jaffna university on May 14 listed hundreds of names of students, academics, administrators, teachers and school principals marked for death by a shadowy outfit calling itself the Tamil Alliance to Defend the Nation. The death threat came amid ongoing protests by school and university students over the disappearance of four students from two schools on the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka.

The poster declared that, “after closely following these students and staff, it is exposed that they are closely collaborating with Tiger terrorists [the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)] and received arms training”. It concluded with the chilling warning: “All of these should be subjected to the death sentence. We are waiting for a suitable time to punish them.”

The poster listed 324 names. Among the academics were 85 members of the Arts and Fine Arts faculty, 69 from Management and Commerce, 57 in Science, 42 in Medicine, 39 in Agriculture, 7 in Native Medicine and 24 administrative staff.

The accusations included “supplying weapons for the Tigers, causing the deaths of security forces, providing information about the security forces to the Tiger terrorists, publishing leaflets and statements slandering the security forces, holding terrorist ceremonies vilifying the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, encouraging Tigers’ terrorist activities ... and helping the terrorists by funding and other methods”.

The list of allegations can only have come from those in the Sri Lankan military and police who, working in collusion with pro-government paramilitaries, have organised death squads to terrorise anyone, particularly Tamils, opposed to the vicious communal war into which the government has plunged the island. Over the

past 18 months since President Mahinda Rajapakse was elected, hundreds of people have been killed or “disappeared” in Colombo and the war zones in the North and East of the country.

The latest death threat was particularly aimed against several thousand school and university students who have staged a boycott protest over several disappearances. Three students from Jaffna Hindu College and another from St. John’s College were forcibly abducted on May 4 from their homes in Jaffna. All four were preparing for their Advanced Level exams for university entrance.

As in many other cases, the thugs carried out their dirty work at night when a strict curfew was in place. Jaffna town and the surrounding areas are under the tight control of the security forces, making it all but impossible to move around without their knowledge. Those involved in the abductions are almost certainly operating with the complicity, or under the direction, of the military.

As soon as the protest boycott began, the previously unknown Tamil Alliance to Defend the Nation issued a leaflet threatening a teacher and 16 students from four schools. It accused the students of “carrying weapons in their school bags, hiding pistols and hand bombs and claymore bombs, carrying out hand bomb attacks and launching a boycott of classes”.

Clearly concerned that the protest could spread, the leaflet warned the opposition would be violently suppressed. Despite the threat, the boycott picked up momentum. Many teachers sympathised with the students’ action and university students also joined in. Having failed to contain the protests, the wider threat was issued on May 14.

In a ham-fisted attempt to disclaim responsibility, army headquarters issued a statement on May 15

disowning the death threat. Much like the poster pasted up at the Jaffna University, however, it accused the LTTE of inciting students “to commit violence against state property or members of the security forces”.

“These elements, as all evidence has so far proved, conveniently use the premises at Jaffna University, as one of their major centres to launch various criminal activities, if not to commit crimes on behalf of the LTTE organisation,” the statement declared. “This environment forced administrative authorities to close down the university indefinitely on many a time as against the wishes of the majority of students and academic staff”.

According to the army’s perverse logic, the LTTE was responsible for death threats against students and staff, even though they were protesting against the military: “The latest LTTE strategy with the issuing of ‘death threats’ to students who are busy with their academic sessions is a case in point and is aimed at provoking peace-loving masses as well as blaming the security forces for no fault of theirs.”

The latest student protest is not the first. Last August, students from St Johns College and Chundukuli Girl’s High school in Jaffna launched a boycott to demand the removal of army guard posts and sentry points established close to their schools. This was followed by widespread protests by students in other schools over the same issue. Parents and other residents joined the protest actions.

Jaffna University has been shut several times. Before its recommencement in February, school students held a weeklong protest over the disappearance of two students from Velayutham Maha Vidyalayam and Hartley College. When Jaffna University students joined in, the authorities closed the institution. Half the student population—about 600—who were enrolled from outer areas never returned to study. More are planning to leave the campus after the latest death threats and turmoil on the university.

The attitude of the government and the military to student protesters in Jaffna became apparent soon after Rajapakse narrowly won the November 2005 presidential election. The following month, soldiers fired on a march of more than 200 unarmed university teachers and students who were taking a letter to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, which oversees the 2002 ceasefire, requesting its intervention to stop the military

harassment of Tamils in the Jaffna area. At least 14 protesters were injured in the shooting.



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