

Two Sri Lankan Red Cross workers abducted in central Colombo

Vilani Peiris**14 June 2007**

The abduction and brutal murder of two Sri Lankan Red Cross Society (SLRCS) employees, both Tamils, on June 1 has further exposed the Colombo government's lie that its security forces have nothing to do with the hundreds of disappearances and killings over the past 18 months.

The crime was a particularly brazen one. Sinnarajah Shanmuganathan, 38, and Karthigesu Chandramohan, 28, were members of a group of six aid workers who had been in Colombo for a four-day SLRCS training program. All of them were waiting to catch a train at Colombo's busy Fort railway station to return to their homes in the eastern town of Batticaloa.

The aid workers were approached at about 6.45 p.m. by men who said they were police officers from the Criminal Investigations Department (CID). "Some people in civilian clothes said they were from the police and wanted to see the identity cards of the six workers... They took away two of them saying it was for further questioning," Red Cross director general Neville Nanayakkara explained.

The other four aid workers insisted on waiting with Shanmuganathan and Chandramohan until the questioning was over. But, according to Nanayakkara, "the men drove off in a white van." White vans, which have been reported in other recent cases of abduction, have a history in Sri Lanka as the standard form of transport used by the security forces' notorious dead squads.

The following morning the mutilated bodies of Shanmuganathan and Chandramohan were found dumped at the Dumbara estate in Ratnapura district, about 100 kilometres southeast of Colombo.

The killings provoked widespread anger. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society issued a joint statement strongly condemning the murders. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressed concern for the safety of civilians and aid workers as the country's civil war escalates.

As a mark of protest, the Red Cross branch in Batticaloa halted all activities until further notice and more than 5,000 volunteers suspended their services. The Red Cross headquarters in Colombo closed on June 4. Banners were displayed at major junctions in Colombo and suburbs expressing outrage over the killings. Thousands of people paid their respects at a funeral parlour in Colombo and many more attended the funerals of Shanmuganathan and Chandramohan in Batticaloa.

All the evidence points to the involvement of the security forces

and allied Tamil paramilitary outfits. Fort railway station is located in the centre of Colombo near a high security zone (HSZ). Police and soldiers regularly patrol in and around the station. There are several checkpoints not far from where the abduction took place. Yet, as in many other cases, the abductors were able to enter and leave the area without being challenged.

One of the four aid workers managed to write down the number plate of the white van, 251-6437, and informed the police. According to the Deputy of Inspector General in Sabaragamuwa province, Sarath Perera, the vehicle was used by the Karuna group, which is based in Batticaloa and broke away from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2004. Despite official government denials, Karuna's supporters openly collaborate with the security forces in the Batticaloa district.

An article in last Sunday's *Nation* reported that one of the aid workers had heard men inside the white van speaking in Tamil. As the newspaper noted: "This points the finger at one of the paramilitary groups that work closely with the Sri Lankan army." The article then declared, without any evidence, that "Karuna's group may have learned of links between the victims and the LTTE."

This last point is one of two standard excuses employed by the Colombo political and media establishment to brush aside crimes in which the security forces have been implicated. If there were links to the LTTE, then by implication the victims were "Tiger terrorists" and deserved their fate. Tamil aid workers, in particular, have been repeatedly branded by Sinhala extremists and the military as being "LTTE supporters".

Shanmuganathan and Chandramohan are not the only aid workers to be murdered. Last August 17 employees of France-based agency Action Contre la Faim (ACF) were lined up and killed execution-style after the army retook the eastern town of Muttur following intense fighting with the LTTE. After conducting its own investigations, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) formally found the military responsible.

The latest killings were met with a series of bland denials. Despite the evidence, the Karuna group denied any involvement. The CID's Deputy of Inspector General, W.B. Prathapasinghe, also denied that his men were involved in the killings. Sri Lanka's Red Cross chief Nanayakkara informed Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and the Inspector General of Police Victor Perera about the abductions on June 2, but received no reply.

The other standard excuse was issued by the Presidential

Secretariat. "The timing of the abduction and later killing of the two Red Cross volunteer workers last weekend seems to be clearly aimed at discrediting both President Mahinda Rajapakse and the Government on the issue of Human Rights violations, and tarnishing the image of Sri Lanka abroad," a spokesman told the media.

In other words, the LTTE carried out the murders in order to discredit the government. Of course, neither President Mahinda Rajapakse, the Presidential Secretariat, the police nor any other government agency provided any facts to support this bald assertion. The security forces have not beefed up their presence in central Colombo in response to this supposed new LTTE threat.

The absurd claim that the LTTE has carried out everything from abductions to the murder of their own political supporters to tarnish the government's reputation is becoming worn out. The LTTE does not need conduct to such high-risk operations when the president is discrediting himself.

Since narrowly winning office in November 2005, Rajapakse has plunged the country back to civil war, ordering the military to carry out a series of offensive operations in the East in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. The president has maintained a state of emergency, re-imposed draconian laws to permit detention without trial, denounced striking workers as traitors and threatened the media. Moreover, there is mounting evidence from human rights organisations that the military has abducted, and in some cases killed, hundreds of people as part of its campaign to terrorise the country's Tamil minority and opponents of the war.

Rajapakse is increasingly under fire at home and internationally over his government's gross abuse of basic democratic rights. On June 1, the day of the Red Cross abductions, the president held a meeting with family members of other abductees in a bid to publicly show his concern and to try to convince them that his government was not involved.

According to the Sri Lankan media, Rajapakse has given the police a seven-day deadline to uncover "vital clues" in the case of the Red Cross abductions. He told international and Sri Lankan representatives of the Red Cross on June 5 that he was "even prepared to bring down foreign sleuths in the event of the police failing to meet the deadline." At the same time, he again implied the killings could be an LTTE conspiracy against his government.

This is not the first time that Rajapakse has tried to deflect criticisms, by promising inquiries and the involvement of international experts. Following the outcry last year over the murder of ACF employees in Muttur, the president set up a special Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in November to investigate 16 specific cases. In February, he went further and established an International Independent Group of Eminent Persons to "observe" the workings of the presidential commission.

All of these moves have proven to be nothing but window dressing. The International Independent Group of Eminent Persons issued its first report on June 10 which found that the presidential commission "did not commence even preliminary investigations and inquiries until May 2007, despite being constituted six months earlier." The report also accused the presidential commission of failing to protect witnesses, operating without transparency and lacking financial independence. The body's funds are managed

directly by the Presidential Secretariat.

More than seven days after the Red Cross murders, the Sri Lankan police have yet to announce any discovery of "vital clues" and have made no arrests. Nor are they likely to. No serious investigation has taken place into the hundreds of abductions over the past 18 months, let alone the prosecution of those responsible. To do so would raise too many questions about the involvement of the highest levels of the military and the government.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka is currently waging an international campaign to demand an investigation into the disappearance of party member Nadarajah Wimaleswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan on March 22 from islands near the Jaffna peninsula. The most likely culprits are members of the Sri Lankan Navy which maintains tight security throughout the area. The SEP is also demanding a full investigation into the murder of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas on August 7 in the eastern town of Mullipothana.

We appeal once again to our supporters and WSWS readers to write to the Sri Lankan authorities.

Letters can be sent to:

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Copies should be sent to the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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