

Sri Lankan government cracks down on protesting farmers

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Sri Lankan police have carried out a wave of arrests after protests by thousands of farmers in the Northwest province against their forced eviction to make way for an irrigation scheme. The police action came in the wake of an angry confrontation on June 11 between farmers in several remote villages near Wariyapola and Irrigation, Ports and Civil Aviation Minister Chamal Rajapakse.

The minister, who is a brother of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, was in the area for an inspection tour. As part of an irrigation scheme, the government is building a dam across the Deduru Oya, a major river through the province. Farmers in several villages, including Weraherayagama, Kanogama and Potuwewa, will be immediately displaced and are angry over the inadequate facilities where they are being moved.

Around 2,000 farmers, their wives and children staged a demonstration at Weraherayagama. When Rajapakse arrived around noon accompanied by Self-Employment Minister Sarath Nawinna and Highways Minister T.B. Ekanayake, the protesters confronted them, demanding definite guarantees over their eviction. Having nothing to offer, Rajapakse arrogantly declared: “We can’t do what you say. We can’t build the palaces you expect. Whatever the opposition, we will continue with this project.”

At that point one of the protesters snapped back: “You enjoy a comfortable life in your palaces and we are suffering here. We want a solution for our problems.” When Rajapakse tried to leave, the protesters surrounded his vehicle and demanded a written promise to deal with their demands. The police and ministerial security detail immediately whisked the dignitaries away.

“When we heard that minister was coming, we went to present our problems expecting reasonable solutions because the project director cheats us. In this area, 90 percent of the people voted for President Mahinda Rajapakse in the [November 2005] presidential election,” a farmer told the WWS.

S.P Luwis Singho, the president of the Organisation of

Displaced People of Deduru Oya Project, denied government allegations that an “invisible political hand” was behind the farmers’ protest. “What they want is to discourage us and disrupt our movement,” he told the WWS. Critical of all the major parties, he added: “These politicians are thieves. Since the war restarted, people have been displaced and died there [in the North and East]. Here we are also being displaced. What will be the future for our children?”

Immediately after the incident, the local police began arresting farmers on the basis of videos taken by the minister’s media team. Twenty people were detained over two days and face charges of unlawful assembly, sabotaging a minister’s meeting, damaging state vehicles and injuring two police.

On June 19, more than a thousand people gathered outside the court to show their solidarity with those arrested. The villagers demanded the immediate release of the detainees and an end to police harassment. Armed police prevented all but lawyers from entering the court. Another four arrests were made by plain-clothes police who were mingling with the crowd. Those arrested have been remanded until July 3.

Under the proposed Deduru Oya irrigation scheme, nearly 1,000 families in the Wariyapola, Yapahuwa Hiriyala and Kurunegala electorates are to be evicted. The project, which was begun in March, is expected to inundate more than 5,000 acres of cultivated lands. The government promised suitable land, compensation and basic facilities such as water, health, education and transport; but has not lived up to its pledges.

In the first stage of the relocation in March, 72 families were shifted to Nelungama at Karuwalagaswewa in the Puttalam. News of the poor conditions soon got back to other farmers. Many women and children have not moved to the new area because of the fear of wild animals, including elephants, boars and bears.

E.M. Karunawathie, the wife of a relocated farmer, told

the WSWs: “They have given us one acre of highland and one acre of wetland. We received only 16,000 rupees [about \$US150] to build a temporary hut. People can only build small mud huts with coconut leaves as roofing. They only helped us to clear the land. We had to pay all the other expenses needed to prepare the land for cultivation. No farming equipment or seeds were provided as promised. We have not been paid the promised compensation for our land yet and we are not sure when they are going to pay it.

“At present, we get a 6,000-rupee monthly allowance, which they promise will continue for 18 months. But it is unbelievable what is happening. We do not have enough water to drink and wash. People have to travel 20 kilometres from Karuwalagaswewa to the nearest town, Anamaduwa. They have to pay for three-wheeler taxis because there is no public transport. The nearest hospital is at Anamaduwa. There are only two small schools and our children have to walk 3 to 4 kilometres to reach them.”

H.M. Dharmasena, 51, a farmer and father of two, was bitter about having to move. He has four acres at Potuwewa and took years to build a house for his family, but has no idea what type of land he will be relocated to. “Because of the uncertainty and difficulties, some people sent to Nelungama have begun to come back,” he said.

Dharmasena explained that farmers were facing serious difficulties. “How can people live without an adequate income when the price of everything is going up everyday? Farming is not profitable. To cultivate an acre of paddy you need at least 20,000 rupees. We have no irrigated water. If there is not enough rainfall we have to pump water from the Deduru Oya. There are other expenses for fertiliser and chemicals. If the harvest is poor, we don’t get enough income.

“If they uproot us and settle us somewhere else without basic facilities, it is like dropping us from the frying pan into the fire. The government is engaged in an unending war and putting the burden onto us. The ruling class treats peasants and workers here like they do in [the war zones] in the northeast.

“Every government makes promises but then ignores the people. After the [opposition] UNP and the [ruling] Sri Lanka Freedom Party cheated us, we hoped that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) would do something for the people—as its name says, the Peoples Liberation Front. When they were in the [previous] government they said they would rehabilitate village tanks [water storage] but they didn’t even come here.”

Dharmasena explained that some of the local farmers went to the Human Rights Commission office in Kurunegala to seek redress, but in vain. “The officials there accused us of lying without even inquiring into our complaints. I am greatly disappointed over these political parties and this system,” he said.

The poverty and lack of facilities was evident in all three villages being relocated. There are only two primary schools and one secondary school to service the whole area and many children must walk or travel long distances to reach them. Public buses are infrequent. There is a hospital at Wariyapola but for serious illnesses people have to travel to Kurunegala, 30 kilometres away.

Weraherayagama is a 50-year-old settlement but the village still does not have electricity. Most houses are made of wattle and daub. Water has to be collected from wells. Unemployment is high throughout the area. Young girls must move to find employment in free trade zones. Some work as contract labour in the Middle East in menial jobs. Young men often join the military because there is no alternative. Others work on a contract basis in local brick factories.

The conditions in these villages are the product of decades of official neglect and the implementation of the IMF agenda of cutbacks to farm subsidies. As it intensifies the island’s civil war, however, the Rajapakse government is placing the burden on the backs of workers and farmers. Huge increases in military spending are being paid for by cutbacks to essential services such as education, health and welfare and funding for projects such as the Deduru Oya irrigation scheme.

Minister Chamal Rajapakse’s arrogant contempt for protesting villagers is symptomatic of the government’s response to opposition on any issue. Whether over the war, workers’ wages, or the conditions facing farmers, it responds by denouncing its critics as traitors or under the control of a “hidden hand”. If that fails to silence protests, the government does not hesitate to trample on basic democratic rights and resort to police state repression.



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