Sri Lankan defence secretary defends the military's crimes

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A BBC interview last month with Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse provided a chilling insight into the gangster mentality of the country's government. Together with his brother Mahinda Rajapakse, Sri Lanka's president, Gotabaya Rajapakse, the country's top defence bureaucrat, wields wide powers as the military intensifies its aggressive war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The interview took place after the illegal detention and forced expulsion of temporary residents from Colombo. On June 7, the police and military rounded up 376 Tamil men, women and children in a pre-dawn raid from cheap lodge accommodation in the capital, put them on buses and dumped them without any form of assistance in the war zones of the North and East. Ignoring basic constitutional and legal rights, the police claimed that the Tamil residents had "no business to stay in the capital".

This gross abuse of democratic rights provoked immediate uproar in Sri Lanka and internationally, putting the government on the back foot. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella initially tried to justify the action by falsely saying the departures had been "voluntary".

However, as criticism continued to mount and the Supreme Court issued an interim injunction against further expulsions, the government backed down. President Rajapakse blamed the police chief and ordered an inquiry into the operation. Three days after the action, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake held a press conference to apologise for the "big mistake" and promised such things would "never happen again".

Within 24 hours, Gotabaya Rajapakse gave his interview to the BBC which was anything but apologetic and defended the actions of the security forces to the hilt. As far as the defence secretary was concerned, the arbitrary roundup of Tamils was completely justified on the grounds of "national security" and the decision to expel them from the capital even quite benevolent in character.

"We have to do search operations and when we arrest suspicious people you don't know who's who. We can't arrest 300 people and then detain them," Rajapakse told the BBC. "So you tell them, 'You don't have any legal business in Colombo, there is a security problem in Colombo, you are the people who are suspected of... we don't want to detain you, go back to your homes'."

According to Rajapakse, the problem was not democratic rights or legality, but one of logistics. The security forces routinely detain "suspicious people" and hold them indefinitely without trial under the country's anti-democratic Prevention of Terrorism Act. But the round-up of so many men, women and children made it difficult to detain them all, so they were bussed out of Colombo and dumped. The unstated alternative would have been to "disappear" or murder them all—as has happened to hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, over the past 18 months.

The communal character of the operation was underscored by Rajapakse himself, when he pleaded: "When you arrest suspicious people we don't know who's who". When one considers that all the deportees were Tamils, it is clear that the sole basis for "suspicion" was ethnicity and language. What Rajapakse blurted out is the racist ideology that underpins the war: as far as the government and the military are concerned, all Tamils are the enemy and thus legitimate targets for harassment, intimidation, abuse and murder.

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Having justified the round-up, Rajapakse abused the critics, accusing Britain and the UN in particular of "bullying Sri Lanka over human rights". He defiantly declared: "Britain, or Western countries, the EU countries, they can do whatever. We don't depend on them. They think that [from them] we get aid. No, they are not giving anything... We won't get isolated. We have all the SAARC [South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation] countries, the Asian countries."

For all this posturing of standing up to the major powers, the Sri Lankan government has been completely dependent on the tacit support, particularly of the US, as it has plunged the country back to civil war. In return for his backing of the Bush administration's bogus "war on terror," the US, Britain, the EU and the UN have remained virtually silent since President Rajapakse ordered the military onto the offensive last July in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement. If muted criticisms are now being made, it is only because Sri Lanka's human rights abuses are so open and flagrant.

The continued silence of all the SAARC countries on the Sri Lankan military's repression is no surprise. Pakistan and Bangladesh are governed by military dictatorships in all but name, which do not hesitate to resort to the same ruthless methods against opposition in their own countries. As for India, for all its democratic pretensions, it has its own "anti-terror" legislation, which it has used to brutally suppress separatist movements in Kashmir and other parts of the country. Any limited Indian criticisms of the Sri Lankan war are made with an eye to the outrage being generated among Tamils in southern India.

Rajapakse absurdly branded the UN as an LTTE propaganda tool for tentatively raising the issue of human rights violations by the Colombo government. The UN, he claimed, had been "infiltrated" by the LTTE. "The UN organisation has taken lot of locals into the organisation. For 30 years or so the LTTE planned this, they infiltrated the UN," Rajapakse said. He produced no list of the "UN infiltrators" or any other evidence to justify his extraordinary allegations.

Rajapakse's most revealing and disturbing comments came when he sought to justify the criminal activities of the Sri Lankan military by referring to the crimes of the Bush administration. Complaining about "double standards," he declared: "All the militaries do covert operations. When the US does operations they say covert operations. When something is [done] in Sri Lanka they call it abductions. This is playing with words... What I am saying is, if there is a terrorist group, why can't you do anything? I am talking about terrorists. Anything is fair," he said.

In an attempt to put the cat back into the bag, Rajapakse immediately declared that he was "fully against abductions". But the implication is obvious: all militaries, including the Sri Lankan military, are engaged in "covert operations". If the US military and CIA can seize, detain, torture and kill people with impunity, then why the criticism when the Sri Lankan security forces do the same! Rajapakse is all but admitting that the government and the military are directly responsible for the death squads that have carried out hundreds of "disappearances" and murders over the past 18 months.

There should indeed be no double standards. Like Bush and his cronies in the White House, Rajapakse, his brother the president, government ministers and military top brass are directing a criminal war of aggression and should be tried for war crimes.

Significantly Defence Secretary Rajapakse's interview with the BBC provoked no criticism from President Rajapakse, Prime Minister Wickremanayake or other ministers, making clear that the government's apology for the expulsion of hundreds of Tamils from Colombo was simply window dressing. The reactionary war and the accompanying campaign of repression against the Tamil minority and all opposition to the government's policies will continue unabated.

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