

Sri Lankan police charge farmers over anti-government protest

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A local magistrate in Sri Lanka granted bail last Tuesday for 21 farmers who have been imprisoned on remand for more than a month after confronting a minister over broken promises on the Deduru Oya irrigation scheme. Police told the court the farmers would be charged on five counts of unlawful assembly, damaging government property and vehicles, and attacking police officers.

Anger boiled over at a protest of more than 2,000 farmers during a visit to the northwestern town of Weraherayagama by Irrigation, Ports and Aviation Minister Chamal Rajapakse on June 11. The protesters were objecting to the government's plans to shift them to make way for a new irrigation scheme and the lack of even basic facilities, including homes, water and electricity, on their new plots at remote Kruwalagaswewa.

When the farmers called for a written guarantee to provide proper facilities, Rajapakse declared: "We cannot build palaces for you". Confronted with angry objections, the minister and his party rapidly beat a retreat, protected by his armed guard. That same night, police rounded up 17 farmers and another four were taken into custody on June 19 during a demonstration outside the Wariyapola court.

Last week, the arrested farmers pleaded not guilty to all charges and were bailed on their personal assurances of 25,000 rupees each. The magistrate warned the defendants not to obstruct the irrigation scheme and fixed the next hearing for September 11.

Local Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leaders stepped in to try to defuse the issue, which has been followed closely by farmers in the district and more widely. The SLFP, to which President Mahinda Rajapakse and his brother Chamal both belong, is the largest party in the ruling coalition. Reliant on support in rural areas, the SLFP is already under fire over rising prices, cutbacks to rural subsidies, the inadequacy of basic services and its renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Wariyapola regional council chairman D.B. Herath led a delegation of the Displaced People of Deduru Oya Project (DPDP) to meet President Rajapakse on July 11. According to DPDP secretary H.M. Senaviratna Banda, the president promised to "consider" the withdrawal of charges on damaging state property. He also pledged to pay full compensation for farmers' property within one year and a tiny plot of land in the Wariyapola area for other evictees. He has also promised to provide electricity, water, health and transport facilities to farmers already evicted and resettled at Karuwalagaswewa.

These "promises," however, are no different from promises

made earlier by the irrigation minister. Moreover, the local SLFP leaders said farmers must pay the damage bill for state vehicles, amounting to 149,175 rupees (\$US 1,353). For poor farmers, the sum of money is huge, in addition to high legal fees, but the families of those arrested collected the money. The police have yet to agree to drop the charge of damaging vehicles.

The charges against the farmers have provoked considerable resentment, which several middle class radical organisations have sought to exploit. The United Socialist Party (USP), the Diyasa Study Circle and the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) held a joint meeting with the DPDP at Potuwewa near Wariyapola on July 1.

The speakers offered no explanation for the government's actions and promoted the illusion instead that Rajapakse could be pressured by large protests. USP leader Siritunga Jayasuriya demagogically appealed for farmers not to "limit the struggle to the village but to bring it to Colombo". "Let us try to get the farmers in custody released by mobilising our strength and courage. Let us march forward with the blessing of the country's people until the struggle is won," he said.

The failure to adequately provide for farmers displaced by the Deduru Oya Project is part of government's broader attacks on the living standards throughout the island. President Rajapakse is pouring billions of rupees into a communal war to crush the LTTE, and forcing working people to bear the burden through rising prices and cutbacks to public spending including on development projects and essential services.

None of the speakers at the Potuwewa meeting even mentioned the war or its consequences for workers and farmers. Irrigation Minister Rajapakse's arrogant remarks and the subsequent round up of protesters is just one more example of the government's repressive methods in dealing with any opposition to its policies. While posturing as "lefts", the USP and other radical groups are hostile to building an independent political movement based on socialist policies to end the war, defend democratic rights and fight for decent living standards.

The relationship of these radical groups to the SLFP and to the government was quickly exposed by their response to the SLFP delegation that met with the president on July 11. After the meeting took place, the USP, the Diyasa Study Circle and the Ceylon Teachers Union accepted Rajapakse's promises as good coin and called off a picketting campaign planned for the following day in Colombo. The USP issued a leaflet declaring: "We will vigilantly pay attention to the next moves of the Daduru

Oya farmers struggle.”

All that has taken place is that the USP has given credibility to the false guarantees of the president and the government. The charges against the 21 farmers remain. The promises of compensation, assistance and proper services for displaced are yet to materialise. The government’s number one priority remains its destructive and reactionary war, for which it demands that workers and farmers must sacrifice.

WSWS reporters spoke to several relatives of those arrested in Divulagasipitigama, Nagollagama, Walpaluwa and Kekulawala.

D.M. Podibanda, 58, a farmer from Divulagasipitigama, explained that two of his sons—D.M. Saman Kumara and D.M. Anil Kumara—were detained by police. Both are still being held in remand.

“My son Saman Kumara is a disabled soldier. He did not participate in the June 11 protest. The police came in the dead of night at about 2 a.m. I begged them not to arrest him but to arrest me and my other two sons instead. But they did not listen.”

Podibanda said his son had been wounded in fighting in 1999 in Mannar and was treated for three months in an army hospital. Saman Kumara was paid only 3,000 rupees for that period and was then sent to work in an apparel factory making army uniforms. His wounds did not heal properly and his leg had to be operated on again, leaving him paralysed for several months. Now he can only walk with great difficulty.

“Our family depended on him when he was in the army,” Podibanda said. “As he was unable to work, the army stopped his payments. Now Saman survives by collecting sand from the river and selling it. His 10-year-old daughter is very upset about her father’s arrest.

“Poor youth join the army because they have no other option and they get killed. The poor are suffering. The elite do not send their children to war. They enjoy every privilege. At the same time, they put the burden of the war on us and use the laws introduced for the war against us as well.

“My other son, who is in the remand prison, has a 10-month-old baby. He is suffering from fever. We are permitted only three minutes to see him. Prison officers check all food parcels and allow no time for us to speak. Those inside complain the prison is overcrowded.”

After Anil Kumara was arrested, his wife returned from Karuwalagaswewa because they had no protection there. Wild elephants roamed at night. Anil’s wife said: “We have inadequate water to drink and wash. Once in 15 days they release water for the paddy fields. We use that water to wash. Because of this, my baby is suffering from a skin disease.”

Namal Samaradivakara, who has blood cancer, was arrested on June 19 at Wariyapola during the protest over the previous detentions. His wife Chandralatha took his medical records to the police, but he was not released until the following day. “We have two children—a daughter and a son. We cannot cultivate the land given to us at Karuwalagaswewa. We earn our living here doing odd jobs. I asked about land at Nikaweratiya but have received no reply from the officials,” she said.

Her son, Sampath priyantha Samaradivakara, who is just 11, does odd jobs to help support the family. “After school I dig

sands,” he said. “It takes five days for me to dig a cube of sand. For one cube, the permit holders pay just 1,000 rupees. Some days I make bricks or prepare clay for bricks. We are paid two rupees a brick. Making clay is very difficult. Some earth pits are very deep. Five of us can make 1,500 bricks a day. Saturdays and Sundays we work until 7 o’clock in the evening. Many of my friends do this job to support the family.”

W. Liliyan Nona said her son, Sugath Rohana, and son in law, Nihal Pradeep Kumara, were among those arrested. “The lawyers say we cannot get our children free as quickly as we expected. We have to pay large legal fees. My sons do not want to pay the money, but I am sad. They face very bad conditions in the prison. They complain about not having enough water to wash. They are being treated in the prison like wild animals.”

Nona expressed her disgust at the ongoing war: “It is the work of politicians. People are being killed and displaced. We were displaced on March 22 by forced eviction. We take alms to the temple. And do all those monks, who campaign for the war, want to talk about our problems?”

J.M. Heratbanda, 65, from Divulgasipitigama, defended the protesters, saying they would not have confronted the minister if he had solved their problems.

“I settled at Divulgasipitigama with my family in 1960. My experience is that the condition of farmers has become poorer under every government. The farmers cannot farm or even maintain themselves with the rising cost of living. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) boasted that it would solve farmers’ problems, but we did not see any good from them when they were in office [in 2004-05].

“The recent increase in oil prices has put further burdens on us. As the government has no proper plan to buy our crop, private businessmen take advantage. Although government’s rate it is 16 rupees per kilo, we are compelled sell our produce at 9 to 12 rupees per kilo to these businessmen.

“The unending war is pushing the country into further chaos. While the government puts all the burdens of the war on us, the politicians enjoy lots of privileges.”



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