

Sri Lankan military conducts massive anti-Tamil sweep through Colombo

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5 December 2007

The Sri Lankan government unleashed the largest-ever cordon-and-search operation in Colombo on Sunday, detaining hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, and heightening communal tensions throughout the country. The immediate pretext for the operation was to “flush out” Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters blamed for last week’s bomb blasts in Colombo and nearby Nugegoda.

While the Western Province command was nominally in charge, the military top brass, acting under the instructions of Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, were directly involved in planning the massive sweep. The defence secretary is the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse and has been intimately involved in plunging the island back to war over the past two years.

An estimated 18,000 heavily-armed troops and police were mobilised to comb the predominantly Tamil areas of Colombo, including Kotahena, Wellawatte, Bambalapitya, Kirulapone, Narahenpita and Pettah, as well as the suburbs of Dehiwela, Mount Lavinia, Ratmalana, Wellampitiya and Nugegoda. Many of the residents are Tamils who have fled the war in the North and East or plantation workers from the central hills districts looking for work. Raids also took place in other parts of the country.

Roadblocks were set up covering all the major highways into Colombo. Vehicles and their occupants were checked. Any Tamil was regarded as suspect. Many Tamils travelling on buses were taken into custody. Eyewitnesses reported police as saying: “We arrest any Tamil who we come across.”

In all, over 2,000 Tamils, including women and children, were detained and taken to police stations. Speaking in parliament on Monday, opposition MP Mavai Senathirajah said 419 of those arrested,

including 41 women, had been sent to the Boosa detention camp despite the lack of any incriminating evidence. Boosa is in the largely Sinhala south of the island.

Senathirajah, from the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), claimed that detainees did not have enough drinking water, adequate toilet facilities or room to sleep at the Boosa camp, which already had hundreds of prisoners. Others arrested on Sunday are still crowded into police cells in Colombo.

The Tamil minority suffers systematic official discrimination. Tamils coming to the capital are compelled to register at police stations in their residential areas. On Sunday, however, even those who had fulfilled this requirement were not spared.

Over the past two years, the Rajapakse government has maintained emergency rule and reimposed and strengthened anti-terror laws, which allow for indefinite detention without trial. Tamils living in Colombo have also been subject to extortion, abductions and killings by paramilitary groups associated with the security forces.

The military is continuing its siege of the capital’s Tamil areas. Soldiers have been deployed on both sides of residential streets and have been manning the entrances of some housing estates. Residents told our reporters that they have to prove their identity and are subject to a de facto curfew after 9 p.m. Security forces have been deployed outside some schools.

The operation has provoked widespread anger. The opposition United National Party, which tacitly supports the war, criticised the government in parliament on Monday for its “arbitrary” actions. Even the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna declared that the arrests had been “unreasonable”, while at the same time criticising the TNA for failing to

oppose the LTTE's actions.

In a bid to quell the outcry, chief government whip Jeyaraj Fernandopulle announced the release of around 1,600 of the more than 2,000 detained, but warned of similar operations in the future. He also appealed to the opposition parties to help in the process of separating "terrorists" from innocent people.

The government exploited two bomb blasts on November 28 to justify the communal crackdown. The first took place at the office of Social Services Minister Douglas Devananda, leader of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP). The party is part of the ruling coalition and its paramilitary units operate alongside the military.

A female suicide bomber blew herself up inside Devananda's office, killing his coordinating secretary and injuring several others. While the LTTE has not claimed responsibility, the bombing has all the hallmarks of its suicide operations. Several attempts have been made on Devananda's life.

The second blast took place at a large textiles shop in the Colombo suburb of Nugegoda at about 6.05 p.m. According to eyewitnesses, a person entered and left a parcel at the counter, then left immediately and vanished. While the manager phoned the emergency numbers, the police did not arrive for 30 minutes. The bomb exploded when a nearby traffic policeman amateurishly inspected the parcel. Sixteen people were killed on the spot and another five died from their injuries.

There is no direct proof that the LTTE was responsible for the second blast. However, the two bombings came just one day after LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran delivered his annual heroes day speech, in which he blamed the "Sinhala nation" for the government's renewed war and declared an end to the 2002 ceasefire.

The LTTE has previously targetted ordinary Sinhalese in reprisal for the military's atrocities against Tamils. Such attacks by the LTTE are reactionary in character, fuelling communal divisions between working people and providing the government with an excuse for police-state measures.

Last Sunday's military operation in Colombo occurred under conditions of growing opposition to the government's renewed war and its impact on living standards. While this search was directed against

Tamils, the government has used increasingly repressive methods against the media, opposition politicians and anyone critical of its policies.

It cannot be ruled out that the government and security forces were using the crackdown as a dress rehearsal for the imposition of martial law in the capital.



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