

# Senior Sri Lankan minister killed in bomb blast

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10 April 2008

One of Sri Lanka's most tightly guarded politicians, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, minister of highways and road development, was killed by a bomb in the town of Weliveriya, about 35 kilometres north of Colombo, on Sunday morning. The Colombo government immediately seized on the killing to intensify its communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the North and East of the country.

Fourteen others died and nearly 100 were injured in the blast, which took place as crowds gathered for the start of a marathon race. The event was part of a local festival scheduled for this weekend to mark the Sri Lankan New Year. The minister was the chief guest.

Most of the dead and injured were innocent civilians. Among those killed were the national athletics coach, Lakshman de Alwis, former national marathon champion, K.A. Karunaratne, and several runners. Eyewitnesses said they saw a fireball, with a huge explosion. Nalin Warnasooriya told Associated Press: "I saw severed heads, hands and legs. Blood and body parts were everywhere. It was a horrible scene."

While it has not claimed responsibility, the LTTE is most likely to have carried out the attack. The Sri Lankan military itself and associated paramilitaries are widely believed to have been involved in the assassination of several prominent opposition politicians, most recently United National Party MP Tyagarajah Maheshwaran who was shot dead in broad daylight on January 1. In the attack on Sunday, however, all the evidence so far points to the blast having been caused by a suicide bomber—one of the hallmark methods of the LTTE.

Moreover, Fernandopulle was a central figure in the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and a vociferous advocate of the renewed civil war. He was viewed as a possible future prime minister when the

aging Ratnasiri Wickramanayake retires. In his last public address on April 5, Fernandopulle declared that "there will be no stop to the war until the terrorists are finished off" and "soon we will liberate the north as we have done in the east". As well as being a senior minister, he was chief government whip in parliament and treasurer of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

In the name of national security, Fernandopulle vigorously defended the government's increasingly anti-democratic methods. When the Supreme Court last June ruled against the forcible eviction of all non-permanent resident Tamils from Colombo, Fernandopulle was entrusted with the task of publicly defending the government's atrocious actions. Again, when the Supreme Court ordered the removal of the numerous permanent security barricades in Colombo city, it was Fernandopulle, under parliamentary privilege, who vehemently denounced the decision.

Fernandopulle was chosen to lead the government's campaign in the eastern provincial council election scheduled for May 10. Rajapakse's coalition—the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)—has formed an electoral bloc with the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), an armed LTTE splinter group, which collaborates closely with the military and is notorious for its intimidation of voters during recent Batticaloa district elections. The TMVP is the prime suspect in a series of political murders and disappearances. Fernandopulle bluntly opposed opposition calls for the disarming of the TMVP.

Fernandopulle's assassination, however, along with the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians, plays directly into the hands of the government. Rajapakse and his ministers quickly used the bombing to whip up communal hatreds and justify their repressive policies. President Rajapakse wasted no time in ordering

retaliatory air strikes against alleged LTTE targets. Hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians have been killed and maimed in previous raids.

The government's own killing of innocent civilians in no way justifies retaliatory slaughter. The LTTE's attempt to blame the "Sinhalese nation"—that is, all Sinhalese—for the death and destruction of Rajapakse's renewed war is divisive and reactionary. Ordinary Sinhalese who were killed and injured in last Sunday's bombing are not responsible for the crimes of the Rajapakse government and the military. The vast majority of Sri Lankans—Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims alike—are opposed to the war and the misery that it has brought to working people.

The LTTE's separatist program does not represent the interests of the Tamil masses, but layers of the Tamil bourgeoisie, who want to carve out a statelet in the North and East of the island and establish their own cheap labour platform for foreign investors. The targeting of a high-profile figure like Fernandopulle is designed to pressure the Rajapakse government to back off its continuing offensives against the LTTE's northern strongholds.

At the same time, the LTTE continues its appeals to the "international community"—that is, to the US and other major powers—to intervene to stop the war and restart peace talks. Taking its cue from the Bush administration, the "international community" has turned to blind eye to the Rajapakse government's tearing up of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, its anti-democratic methods and crimes. The latest denunciations of Sunday's bombing are just one more example of hypocrisy in Washington and other world capitals.

The government is beating the patriotic drum as a prelude to escalating the war and further cracking down in preparation for the eastern provincial election. In denouncing the bombing, Rajapakse declared: "This will not weaken our resolve to eradicate terrorism from our midst and bring peace, harmony and democracy to all our people". Fernandopulle is being given a state funeral with full national honours and the occasion has been declared a national day of mourning.

The government was backed by virtually the entire media and political establishment in Colombo. The *Island* published a front-page editorial calling for all public events to be curtailed and for the country to be

placed on a full war footing. "It is mind boggling why so many motoring events, exhibitions, marathons, bicycle races, political rallies should happen at a time when the war has reached a crucial juncture. Any other country would have been on a war footing by now," it declared.

The Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) demanded an intensification of the war. Calling for an end to any pretence of seeking a political solution to the war, the JVP statement declared: "Without wasting time on separatist devolution of power proposals, the government must give full support and encouragement to the heroic security forces to completely defeat the LTTE."

On the day after the bomb blast, the military retaliated with air strikes on Mankulam, near the LTTE headquarters in Kilinochchi, and claimed to have hit a "black tiger camp" for training suicide bombers. A military spokesman claimed that the air strikes and ground operations had killed 48 LTTE cadres in Vavuniya, Mannar and Weli Oya. There are no independent reports, as journalists are banned from the war fronts. In all likelihood, civilians were among the casualties.

The military also banned all vehicles coming from Vavuniya, which is the transit point between the north and the south of the island. Security forces launched cordon and search operations at Weliweriya and the neighbouring towns of Gampaha and Katunayake and arrested a number of Tamil "suspects".



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