Two more bombs kill 25 civilians in Sri Lanka

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Two bomb blasts targeting buses in Sri Lanka killed at least 25 people and injured around 100 more last Friday. They were the fourth and fifth explosions to occur within a week in the southern parts of the island.

One bomb hit a bus travelling from Kottawa to Mt. Lavinia at about 7:30 a.m., between the University of Moratuwa and Katubedda junction in the southern suburbs of Colombo. The bus was packed with over 100 passengers heading to work. Twenty-one were killed on the spot, eight of whom were women. About 80 were injured and admitted to nearby hospitals, several in a serious condition. By Sunday, three had succumbed to their injuries.

Another bombing occurred inside a private bus at Polgolla in the central hills capital, Kandy, at about 3:45 p.m., killing at least two and injuring about 20. The bus was less crowded than the one struck in the morning, otherwise the number of casualties would have been far higher.

Friday's bombings are the latest in a series of intensive blasts targeting innocent civilians. Sri Lankan police and military officials claimed to have detected other unexploded bombs as well. Twenty seven commuters were injured just two days earlier when a bomb placed on the rail track near Dehiwela, south of Colombo, detonated as a crowded train carrying hundreds of people passed by. A grenade attack at Wellawatta in Colombo killed two and injured 10 on the evening of May 31. And on May 26, a blast on a packed train carrying workers returning home killed 9 and injured around 80 at Dehiwela station.

There is no conclusive evidence as to who is responsible for these appalling attacks on innocent civilians, but whoever organised them, they are heinous crimes, designed to intensify communal tensions between Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people. What can definitely be established, however, is that all the bombings have been seized on by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse to step up its criminal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

As with the previous blasts, the Colombo government and the military immediately blamed the LTTE, without providing any evidence. Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara accused the LTTE of being behind the bombings, describing the latest Moratuwa blast as a "cowardly attack" by a "ruthless organization".

While it would not be new for the Sri Lankan military itself to plant agents to carry out such attacks, the LTTE has a long record of bombing Sinhala civilians because of its own reactionary communal politics. Rather than appealing to Sinhalese workers and farmers to oppose the racist and militarist policies of the Colombo elite, the LTTE blames the entire "Sinhala people" for the 25-year civil war and the decades of discrimination implemented against the Tamil minority living in the island's north and east. The separatist organisation's attacks have played into the hands of successive Colombo governments—providing them with fuel to whip up communalism and prosecute the war.

Immediately after the Moratuwa blast, a curfew was imposed in the area, including at the University of Moratuwa. Police and military forces conducted a house-to-house search operation, sealing off the area for several hours. A police spokesman, Ranjith Gunasekera, told the media that 58 "suspects" were arrested.

The main target of the police operation was the university, which has hundreds of Tamil students from the war-torn north and east of the island. A university employee told the WSWS: "The police rushed to the university about two hours after the explosion. Neither the students nor workers were allowed to leave the premises. Hostels were severely searched with the help of the student unions. More than a hundred armed police and army personnel participated in the operation."

At lunchtime, the university employee wanted to go to a nearby school to bring his young daughter back, but had to make several requests to the police to obtain permission to leave. Eventually, an officer let him go after thoroughly searching him. The employee explained: "He [the police officer] searched my office bag and every document inside for about five minutes. He even questioned me about my Tamil textbook, which I had with me because my Tamil class was on that day. My cell phone was searched and I was questioned about received call phone numbers."

University workers were finally allowed to leave at about two in the afternoon, but police continued to search the

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campus, including the hostels, throughout the evening. The following day, armed police officers manned the university entrance.

The WSWS spoke to a Tamil engineering student who had just started his course at the university when the blast took place. “When the police came inside to search, my Sinhala colleagues defended me. My identity card was examined. Our lectures were cancelled. My Sinhala friends accompanied me to a boarding house near the university premises after the search operation. Another five Tamil students in the boarding house were arrested and brought to Moratuwa police station.”

The engineering student said Tamil students who were not arrested were asked to return to their homes in the north or east, or stay away from the university. Those from the Kilinochchi and Vavuniya districts of the northern province were thoroughly questioned. He added: “Now I am thinking, ‘how I will go back for lectures?’ I feel insecure. It is a serious problem.”

A Sinhala engineering student told the WSWS: “The university administration directed the police and military personnel to hostels where Tamil students are staying. About 20 students were arrested and one was handcuffed. At that time, a few Sinhala racist elements among the students shouted, ‘he should be killed’ and pelted stones at him. But they didn’t get support from the majority of Sinhala students.”

The Sinhala student expressed concerns felt not just by Tamil but also Sinhala students: “While the search operation was going on, several racist thugs from the surrounding villages came to the front of the university gate and shouted that Tamil students should be eliminated. I think the blast will be utilised to deploy police and military personnel frequently to university premises. It will threaten any struggle of students for their rights.”

Since last week’s bomb attacks, the Rajapakse government has unofficially restricted Tamils travelling from the northern Vavuniya, Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu districts to the capital. Those wanting to visit Colombo must give reasons, the address where they will be staying and the duration of the trip. The police can refuse them a pass to make the trip.

The government’s rapid implementation of increased police powers and draconian measures against democratic rights come as a direct response to the bombings. The involvement of forces within military intelligence, government agents or paramilitary elements loyal to the Rajapakse government cannot, therefore, be ruled out.

Sri Lankan authorities are floating various dubious stories about the blasts. For instance, the police told the media that the Moratuwa bomb was set off by a remote control device. A pair of rubber slippers and the national identity card of a female with an address in Batticaloa, in the east, were found 15 metres from the scene. While the address is meant to indicate that the attacker is a Tamil, it is difficult to believe that the perpetrators would have brought ID cards along with them.

In a statement on the Moratuwa bombing, President Rajapakse accused the LTTE of trying to provoke the Sinhala majority. “This brutality ... shows the efforts of the LTTE to provoke a backlash against the Tamil people from which it hopes to gain.” He called on people “to continue to assist the police and security forces in the task of eradicating terrorism from our country”. During the opening of a “war heroes” monument in parliament on Sunday, he promised that the government would not “leave the war for the next generation”.

The government is desperate to win support for the deeply unpopular war that it renewed in July 2006. It is highly unstable, with 110 ministers appointed—the greatest number of any government in the world—in order to maintain its shaky coalition. Its military campaign to take LTTE-held areas in the north has been facing stiff resistance, resulting in heavy losses.

Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake reported to parliament that in May alone 138 soldiers were killed, while 549 troops and police officers were injured. Hundreds of soldiers were killed in the previous four months.

Worsening global inflation, particularly in food and oil prices, has led to escalating pressure on living standards for broad layers of the population. Sri Lankan teachers will launch a two-day protest this Wednesday and Thursday, demanding higher salaries, despite the fact that the teachers’ unions have been trying to limit them to a sick leave campaign. With the government’s huge war budget eating into essential social services and subsidies to the poor, workers in other sectors are also pressing to defend their conditions.

Within this highly volatile situation, the Rajapakse government is using the bombings to intensify its reactionary communal campaign aimed at weakening and dividing the working class and stampeding it behind the war effort.

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