

Bomb blast in Sri Lanka targets rail commuters

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A bomb blast in a crowded train last Monday at the Dehiwela station in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo killed 9 commuters and injured around 80 others. The explosion, at around 5.30 p.m., deliberately targetted ordinary working people returning home after work. Whoever was responsible, the bombing was a criminal act aimed at inflaming communal tensions amid the country's ongoing civil war.

The Colombo government and defence ministry immediately blamed the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the attack, but provided no evidence. The police claimed that a 1.5 kilogram bomb had been placed in an overhead luggage rack in the fifth compartment. The next day, the police reported taking into custody a Tamil suspect from the northern Jaffna peninsula who was living in Dehiwela.

Although it has made no statement, the LTTE is certainly capable of carrying out the bombing and has previously targetted innocent civilians in the predominantly Sinhalese south of the island. In February, a suicide bomber struck at Colombo's Fort Railway Station, killing 14 people. In July 1996, the LTTE carried out a train bombing near Dehiwela that resulted in the deaths of more than 56 people and injured about 200.

The LTTE blamed one of the military's deep penetration units for planting a bomb on May 23 that destroyed a van and killed 16 civilians, including four children under the age of 12. The blast took place in LTTE-held territory close to Kilinochchi. While the army denied responsibility, its secretive long-range squads and allied paramilitaries are the most likely suspects.

It is possible that the LTTE carried out the May 26 bomb blast at Dehiwela station in retaliation. Like the Colombo political establishment, the LTTE is based on

communal politics, blaming the "Sinhalese people" for the reactionary war being waged by the government and the military. The targetting of innocent Sinhalese civilians only heightens communal tensions and plays directly into the hands of the government.

It cannot be ruled out, however, that the military or associated paramilitaries carried out the Dehiwela bombing. Having plunged the island back to war in 2006, President Mahinda Rajapakse is facing a growing political and economic crisis. The military offensives in the North have effectively stalled and the shaky ruling coalition is confronting growing discontent over the war and its economic impact. Prices for food, fuel and other basic items are skyrocketing.

The Rajapakse government has increasingly resorted to anti-democratic methods to stifle any opposition in the media, and from striking workers and protesting farmers. A state of emergency is in force that gives the president, military and police extraordinary powers, including detention without trial. Hundreds of people have been "disappeared" or murdered by pro-government death squads.

The military is quite capable of carrying out a bombing in Colombo to blame the LTTE and further whip up communal hatreds. For more than six months after Rajapakse won office in November 2005, the army and allied paramilitary waged a covert war of provocation and murder in the East and North aimed at weakening the LTTE and goading it into retaliating. This set the stage for Rajapakse to launch open offensives in July 2006 and formally tear up the 2002 ceasefire in January this year.

Military intelligence units are notorious for conducting dirty operations. In February last year, the army detained the leaders of the previously unknown Revolutionary Liberation Organisation (RLO). Under

interrogations, the detainees allegedly confessed to having received training and arms from the LTTE and having been involved in several bombings in the South. The government and the military denounced them as “Sinhala Tigers” and exploited the glare of publicity to deflect attention from its abuse of democratic rights.

The propaganda blitz backfired when the *Sunday Leader* and *Ravaya* revealed that military intelligence had been involved in these activities. One of its agents, “Sharmal”, had penetrated the RLO, had participated in the LTTE training, was in charge of its weapons and had organised at least one of the bomb attacks. Sharmal had high level connections and had been introduced to defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, by Wimal Weerawansa, former parliamentary leader of the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

More than 15 months later, the alleged RLO members, some of whom worked in the railways, are still being held without charge. The government used their arrest to intimidate and threaten not only railway workers but other sections of the working class engaged in campaigns for higher wages and against planned privatisations.

Increasingly, the Rajapakse government and the military are acting above the law. Virtually no one has been held to account for the many murders, disappearances and other acts of thuggery that have taken place against opponents and alleged LTTE sympathisers over the past two years. On May 22, a senior journalist for the *Nation*, Keith Noyahr, was abducted, tortured and dumped near his home with a warning not to write any further on the war. Rajapakse has announced an inquiry, but one can predict in advance that there will be no serious probing of the involvement of the security forces in the incident.

Last Tuesday, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse summoned the leaders of the Working Journalists’ Association, Poddala Jayantha and Sanath Balasooriya, for a dressing down about media coverage of military issues. He bluntly warned them against making statements critical of the government and the war. According to several media reports, the defence secretary threatened that they could be harmed by persons who “revered” the Army Commander, General Sarath Fonseka.

The government seized on the Dehiwela bombing to

justify the war. Speaking to a select group of media representatives, President Rajapakse declared: “No one should have expectations that there will be a let up in the battle against terrorism because of the frenzied attacks by the LTTE.” In a hysterical tone, he added: “Target me and spare civilians because I am responsible for what is being done to the LTTE.”

Whoever organised the bomb blast, it has certainly provided a useful political diversion for a government confronting widespread anger over deteriorating living standards. Just last week, prices for petrol, diesel and kerosene prices were raised by about 25 percent, adding to the cost of transport and other essentials. While international price rises form a significant component of these increases, huge military expenditures are compounding inflation, which hit nearly 30 percent in April.



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