

Sri Lanka: Second bomb blast in Colombo in nine days

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An explosion in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo on Wednesday injured 27 commuters during the morning rush hour. A bomb had been placed on the rail track near Dehiwela station and detonated as a crowded train passed by, heading to the city centre and carrying hundreds of workers and school children.

The latest blast took place just nine days after an explosion on a crowded train at Dehiwela station killed 9 people and injured around 80. The victims were mainly workers returning home. Bombings on trains, buses and in public places are becoming increasingly frequent, nearly two years after President Mahinda Rajapakse thrust the country back to war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Wednesday's bombing occurred several hundred metres from Dehiwela station. The explosion hit the middle of the train—the engine and two compartments had passed, six compartments followed. Those who were near the doors and windows and on the steps of the congested train caught the force of the blast. The victims who suffered fractured legs and arms and hearing loss were taken to the government hospital at Kalubowila.

The military and police immediately blamed the LTTE. Military spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara told the media: "It is the LTTE who have done that and we have arrested a person who has connections with LTTE." Such statements, however, have little credibility. Nanayakkara provided no evidence and his comments were made as the investigation had barely begun.

The LTTE is certainly capable of bombing innocent civilians. It has a record over the past 25 years of carrying out such attacks when confronted with a military crisis. Its communal ideology of Tamil separatism, which blames the "Sinhala people" as a

whole for the government's oppression of the Tamil minority, is just as poisonous as the Sinhala chauvinism of the political establishment in Colombo.

Both rail bombings were preceded by attacks on civilians in LTTE-held areas. On Tuesday, the LTTE accused the military's deep penetration units of being responsible for ambushing a vehicle travelling to Mankulam in a rebel-controlled area. Six people were killed in the ambush. The blast in Colombo on Wednesday may have been in retaliation.

The LTTE has, however, denied responsibility for attacks on civilians, including the initial bombing at Dehiwela station. In an interview with *Tamilnet* on May 30, the LTTE's political wing leader B. Nadesan said: "The LTTE categorically denies responsibility for the attacks on civilians in Sri Lanka. We never mean ill-will against the Sinhalese people."

It may be that Nadesan is simply lying. But in the past, the LTTE has tended to remain silent rather than make statements on its attacks. Moreover, Nadesan's denial comes amid conflicting accounts of the latest bomb blast by the authorities in Colombo.

Police spokesman Ranjith Gunasekera told the state-owned *Daily News* yesterday that there had been eyewitnesses. "Two vigilant civilians passing by observed a man carrying a suspicious parcel and attempting to place it at the railway track. When they shouted, the man threw the bomb and the remote control device to the railway track and fled," he said.

In the same article, the deputy head of the Government Analyst Department, W.D.G.S. Gunathilaka, insisted that the 2.5 kilogram bomb had been detonated by remote control. The obvious question arises: how was the bomb set off, if the man fled leaving the "suspicious parcel" and the remote control device behind? The writer did not bother to

explain the contradiction.

On Wednesday, the police announced the name of a suspect—Jatheesan Balasubramaniam, an ethnic Tamil—and gave details of his government-issued national identity card. Yesterday, police told the media that he had been arrested at a checkpoint near the northern town of Vavuniya—some 240 kilometres from Colombo. How Balasubramaniam managed to get travel such a distance on Sri Lanka's dilapidated transport system, let alone evade the many police and military checkpoints, has not been explained.

The police spokesman said 11 people have been arrested so far. Balasubramaniam is alleged to have been working under the orders of someone else. Police cited the eyewitness account of a three-wheeler taxi driver named Mohamed Gafoor who chased and hit a man fleeing the scene of the explosion. The man escaped, dropping a bag in the process, but none of the detail provided by the police linked him directly to the bombing.

There is every reason to be cautious about accepting the accounts provided by the security forces. The army is also quite capable of organising such bombings to justify the ongoing war and create a climate of fear and intimidation. Military intelligence in particular is notorious for its connections to various pro-government paramilitaries as well as criminal gangs whose leaders would think nothing of killing innocent civilians.

Whoever carried out the bombings, the Rajapakse government has exploited them to whip up anti-Tamil sentiment and divert attention from its unpopular war, its attacks on democratic rights and the worsening economic situation. On June 1, the government increased train fares by nearly 90 percent. Last week, bus fares increased by 27 percent, triggered by a 25 percent fuel price hike.

The government has deliberately fostered an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. A media campaign constantly calls for people to be vigilant. Commuters are prohibited from putting their parcels or bags in luggage racks and seated passengers are advised not to nurse the bags of others. Police and military personnel enter buses to question "suspicious" people. Police checkpoints have been bolstered with civilians. The security forces have stepped up their dragnet search operations. The chief targets of all of these measures are Tamils, who are commonly treated by the security

forces as the enemy.

The government is also cracking down on the media. On Wednesday, a Defence Ministry statement denounced any criticism of the military top brass as "media treachery" and warned that it would take "all necessary measures to stop this journalistic treachery against the country". Accusing critics of being "traitors", the statement declared: "Those who commit such treachery should identify themselves with the LTTE."

Despite the campaign, many people blame the government for the war and its impact. One rail commuter told the WSWs that the bombings had made travelling by train a nightmare. "I fear losing my limbs or life," she said, but then pointed out that life had become difficult since President Rajapakse came to power in 2005.

"Prices of goods have doubled, tripled or increased even more. From yesterday [Wednesday], the cost of a train season ticket rose almost threefold. Recently we demanded a pay rise for teachers, but President Rajapakse told us that it could not be done because of the war. The war has not only created suspicion between Sinhalese and Tamils but also among Sinhala people themselves."

A hospital worker explained: "All the people who are killed by these bombs are innocent and oppressed people such as workers, students and youth. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake recently said that the war effort would not be stopped by any number of LTTE attacks. As the government is the conductor of the war, it has to take the responsibility for the loss of innocent lives."

It is precisely because of the hostility to the war that the government is intensifying its efforts to whip up communal hatreds and divide working people. In this context, the bombings provide a very convenient excuse.



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