

Sri Lankan defence ministry evicts poor families as part of war drive

Our reporters
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The Sri Lankan government has issued orders to evict more than 800 families from their homes in central Colombo, claiming the land belongs to the defence ministry.

Confronted by bulldozers tearing down their houses on July 18, angry residents clashed with riot police and sought intervention by the Supreme Court, which issued a stay order until July 30. However, 45 houses have already been demolished and hundreds of people sent to hurriedly-built wooden huts located about 5 kilometres away.

Thousands of people live in the area known as Glennie Passage, along Sir Chittamplam Gardiner Road in Slave Island. Letters issued on July 10 to each family said they were residing unauthorised on land owned by the ministry, which was identified as the “war department” in the original site plan.

The letter declared: “While using state property without permission is unlawful, taking into account the present security situation you should remove all unauthorised structures within 7 days”. It was signed on behalf of Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse—the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse who is also the country’s defence minister.

Several times since 1977, successive governments have attempted to remove the residents, but this is the first time that the defence ministry has intervened. The eviction operation is yet another instance in which the government is using the war in the north and east against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to attack living conditions and democratic rights.

The air force headquarters is located on one side of the Glennie Passage area and the army headquarters is on the other side, separated by a small canal. As part of boosting the war machine, the Rajapakse government is taking over many areas of the capital to build new military complexes.

The evictions also coincide with the government’s preparations of the city for the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit later this week. It is “beautifying” the city and removing “unauthorised” structures, including dwellings and small shops.

People have lived in this area for about five decades. Most are daily workers and self-employed, including key cutters, cobblers, pavement vendors and three-wheeler drivers. Some of the houses are relatively well built while many others are just huts constructed of wooden planks.

Although residents have never been given legal documents for the land, they were provided with electricity and water services, paid municipal rates and were issued national identity cards at these addresses. Children study at nearby schools. The residents are asking how their settlement can be described as “unauthorised”.

Speaking to the WSWS, the head of the Glennie Passage mosque, T. N. P. Farees, rejected the government’s accusation that the dwellers were unauthorised settlers. “Some people have been here more than 60 years. Initial settlers were Singaporeans brought here during the Second World War. Now there are Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people and they live in harmony”.

Seven days after serving the letter, Urban Development Authority (UDA) officials arrived on July 18 with heavily-armed riot police and started to bulldoze houses without even giving people time to remove their belongings. Thousands of settlers confronted police and blocked the Colombo-Matara railway track, which runs through the area. The police used tear gas to disperse angry residents.

A group of thugs, identifying themselves as UDA officials, attempted to bar the media from covering the incident. *Daily Mirror* journalist Yohan Perera and a cameraman were assaulted. Residents said the attackers were members of the security forces.

By the time the Supreme Court issued a stay order, dozens of houses had been demolished. Even after the court order, the UDA continued the demolition of a total of 45 houses, saying it had not received the court document.

In some houses, clothes, school uniforms, kitchen utensils and electrical appliances like TVs and radios were buried under debris. The attorney-general later assured the Supreme Court that demolitions would not restart until the court’s final determination. However, there are signs that an

intimidation campaign is underway in order to prevent protests and force people to leave. Armed police and security forces have been deployed.

On the evening of July 22, a group identifying themselves as plainclothes police arrived in a white van at the house of A.C.M. Nadurdeen, a municipal councillor, and demanded that he accompany them to a police station. Suspecting that the group was trying to abduct him, Nadurdeen refused to go. Nadurdeen had previously handed a petition to the Indian High Commission concerning the eviction.

Over the past two years, covert groups of security forces and associated paramilitaries have carried out hundreds of abductions, killings and disappearances of people who criticise the government and the war. These death squads operate with impunity and are given free access through the numerous military and police checkpoints established in the capital and suburbs.

The evicted 45 families have been dumped at Weligodawatta in Thotalaga, north of Colombo where each family has been allocated a 15 square-metre hut, some of which are still under construction. The huts are poorly roofed, providing little protection from the rain and the electric wiring is not up to standard. The toilets are inadequate and the only water supply is a common tap. There is only one light per hut. The government has promised to build permanent houses within a year or to pay 8,000 rupees per month if families rent out a house.

However, the residents who spoke to the WSWS do not believe these promises. A 46-year-old mother said: “Three years ago, they gave us the same promise. Two years ago, they laid a foundation stone at a railway yard in Dematagoda, saying flats were to be built for us. However, nothing happened.

“We have been here over 30 years, from childhood, without proper facilities. We have to use common toilets. I have five children. My husband and two sons are working in Middle East, and we live on their earnings. My elder son has got married. The cost of living is high and it is very hard to get by.

“At present, there are six family members in our house. My mother-in-law and her brother both live with us, as they do not have a house. One of my daughters is disabled. We have made a special toilet for her. How can we live in a small hut in this situation?”

A 38-year-old tyre factory worker declared: “In every election, the politicians come and make rosy promises but our lives have gone from bad to worse. I have no trust in those promises. See what have happened to the [December 2004] tsunami victims—thousands are still in temporary huts after four years”.

He also referred to the impact of soaring prices. “My daily

income is 450 rupees and my wife has no job, but we could manage on that earlier. I have two children and wife is expecting another child. Now my daily income is not enough. For one meal, we need 450 rupees.

“If this situation continues there could be food riots. The government imposes the burden of the war through increasing prices. We do not need the war, and 90 percent of people oppose it.”

Children in the area went to neighbouring schools like St Michael’s, St Mary’s and Al Ameen. A schoolgirl, 14, now living at Thotalaga, explained: “My three younger brothers and myself have not gone to school since Friday. We lost our uniforms and textbooks when they bulldozed our house. I am in year 10 and it is time for the second term test, but I cannot sit the test. We have no facilities here to study, and next year I have to sit for the ordinary level examination.”

A young mother, 26, with a one-year-old baby, who is now staying in a temporary hut at Thotalaga with her parents, said she lost everything when her home was bulldozed. “I studied up to advanced level,” she explained. “Like many children my age in this area, I studied with the light of an oil lamp. After school, I went to Saudi Arabia for three years, as I could not find a job here. We built our house with that money. Now my husband is working in Saudi.

“We thought that the future of our child would be good. However, all our hopes have been shattered now. Infants like my baby cannot live here in this dusty place. We came here Friday and several babies are already ill. I will have to go to my uncle’s home with my baby to spend the night.

“The government was elected by the people and they must be responsible for the people. None of the politicians care about us. I am determined not to vote for anyone in the next election.”



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