

# Sri Lanka: Colombo under security siege for South Asian summit

**Our correspondents**  
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President Mahinda Rajapakse's government kept Colombo and its immediate suburbs under a week-long police and military siege for the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) summit on August 2-3, placing unprecedented restrictions on the public. The country is already under emergency rule as a result of the ongoing civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Some 12,000 armed police officers and 7,000 troops were deployed. Security personnel were stationed at every 25 metres on the main roads, and 24-hour mobile and foot patrolling was imposed throughout the capital. During the week, several more additional high security zones were announced in the central areas of the capital, making them out of bound for "outsiders".

The summit was held in a deserted city, with only military and police personnel on the roads. Ordinary people living in the city were confined to their homes.

Hundreds of small shops and street stalls were demolished in the name of removing "unauthorised" structures. Street hawkers were ordered to vacate their business places for 10 days. Beggars were rounded up and removed. Schools were closed, by bringing forward the scheduled vacation.

The navy imposed a five-day ban on fishing in the seas surrounding Colombo city and the nearby Negombo lagoon, stripping more than 3,000 families of their livelihood. They were paid no compensation. Government and private sector employees were given holidays for two days to keep them out of central Colombo.

The cash-strapped government lavishly spent 2.8 billion rupees on the SAARC summit. Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardane reported that 75 percent of the allocation was for security. Another 2.1 billion rupees were spent importing bullet-proof vehicles to transport foreign heads of state and other top officials who attended the summit.

The pretext for the massive security operation was to prevent a "terrorist" attack by the LTTE. However, the LTTE had declared a unilateral ceasefire from July 26 to August 4 to display its "co-operation for the success of the summit". The LTTE's gesture was part of a bid to win the sympathy of the leaders of the eight South Asian countries and major powers, which have been tacitly supporting Rajapakse's renewed war.

The government rejected the truce, claiming it was a ploy, and continued with its northern offensive to seize more LTTE-controlled areas throughout that week. The security measures were more of a rehearsal of contingency plans to deal with working people, whose anger is growing against the government's attacks on living conditions and democratic rights.

In a display of his own country's power, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh came with a heavy security contingent. Two Indian warships—INS Mysore, equipped to combat air, surface and underwater threats with long-range missiles, and INS Ranvir, armed with surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) and a Russian built KA 28 helicopter—were anchored off Colombo. Several hundred Indian special commandos were deployed for Singh's immediate security.

In Colombo, dozens of Tamils were arrested on "suspicion" during military-police search operations. A Tamil construction worker arrested on August 1 told the WSW: "I was arrested because I could not produce my national identity card. I just forgot to bring it and I pleaded with the police, asking them to allow me to go, but they refused. I was released only after three days when my mother produced my identity card. The police threatened to detain me for 14 days the next time. Being a Tamil in this country is a curse."

On July 28, Mary Pearl Jayatillaka, a 64-year-old mother from Alwiswatta, Wattala, a northern suburb, died after suffering a heart attack because the police did not

allow the vehicle taking her to hospital to cross the Colombo-Negombo road. Police had closed the road for security rehearsals.

Several people spoke to the WWSWS about the harassment they had experienced due to the SAARC arrangements.

An Inland Revenue employee said: “I commute from Dehiwela. Usually most workers come by the train as the train fare is less than the bus fare. But last week it was very inconvenient. The police ordered all passengers to disembark and everyone was checked, top to bottom.

“The government said that holding the SAARC summit was a great benefit for the country and the people. But people were harassed like criminals and they did not get any benefit from the summit. How can those countries help us when they have failed to resolve any problems for the people of their own countries? Only government cronies made money—from the various contracts, like building, repairing, road-cleaning, painting walls and fences and catering.”

A Peoples Bank employee said: “As part of the security operation, 30 police officers were stationed inside the bank building where we were working. Everyone who entered the bank was checked. Special identity cards were issued for the employees of several bank branches.

“For years we have experienced restrictions on free movement because of the war against the LTTE. But in the past week, people’s movements in the city were almost completely restricted. Colombo city was really a police-military camp. It is said that billions were spent on the summit. But what have those leaders to offer for the people in Sri Lanka or in this region? They have no solution for the war in Sri Lanka or unemployment and poverty.”

Taxi drivers were unable to go to many areas which cut their earnings. “Now most parts of Colombo city have been declared high security zones,” a taxi driver complained.

A private bus conductor commented: “We did not run our bus for three days from Friday to Monday. The police used some of our buses to block roads without any payment. Who will pay us those losses? Because of the war we face many problems, even threats to our lives. Oil prices and everything else are going up. Two months ago we spent 4,200 rupees for fuel each day; now it has risen to more than 6,000 rupees. The government asks people to be patient until the war is over. How many years has this war been going on? And how many years will it continue? No one knows. The poor have to pay for it.”

An employee at the government-owned Telecom said he thought the security measures were designed to terrorise people. “While the government spends a huge amount of money on the war, its full burden has been put on the people by increasing prices and introducing new taxes. Now the government is going to introduce a number of environmental taxes, including a 2 percent tax for mobile phones.

“When workers resist and fight to defend their living conditions, the government accuses them of supporting terrorism. When workers staged a one-day strike demanding a salary increase last month, they were branded as supporters of the LTTE and disrupters of the government’s war efforts.”

A paddy farmer from Polonnuruwa in the north-central province dismissed the government’s propaganda about a SAARC decision to establish a food bank. “I am 56 and I have cultivated [rice] paddy for over 30 years. My experience is that farmers’ conditions are going from bad to worse. I also read and watch the news regarding farmers in other countries. As in Sri Lanka, I know that farmers in India face the same problems, like indebtedness and suicides.

“The government is boasting about supporting farmers. It is a lie. Farmers cannot sell their crops for reasonable prices. In March and April, paddy prices per kilo went up 32-38 rupees. Now it has gone down to 20-22 rupees. None of the benefits of the price increases went to farmers, only to businessmen. Now the government is considering cutting the fertiliser subsidy.

“I want to end the war in Sri Lanka. Farmers in the north and east cannot do their work because of the war. You see how many people have died for this devastating war. I know that in this area about 15 youth who joined the army died recently. I have two sons. My eldest son has studied up to advanced level. He tried several times to join the army because he has no job, but I blocked him.”



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