

Gunmen kill 16 Sri Lankan villagers

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26 February 2009

An unidentified group of gunmen killed up to 16 people, including three children, and left 20 more injured in a rampage through the village of Karametiya in Sri Lanka's eastern province on Saturday. Whoever carried it out, this criminal attack on ordinary working people plays directly into the hands of Colombo government, which is anxious to deflect criticism of its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Karametiya is a remote village of about 17 families, near Iginiyagala on the border of the eastern Amparai and Moneragala districts. The Sinhalese villagers eke out a living through what is known as Chena cultivation—a type of unirrigated farming generally practiced in hilly areas.

According to media reports, the gunmen entered the village and started to fire indiscriminately on villagers in their fields and inside their homes. The thugs then set fire to some houses before leaving. Two members of the local Civil Defence Force were among the dead. The surviving families, as well as others from neighbouring villages, fled and took refuge in the nearby Ratmalgaha Ella School.

The Sri Lankan media, the government and the military, as always, immediately pinned the blame on the LTTE. The LTTE commander for the Amparai district, Nakulan, denied any involvement and declared that the military "must look for culprits within its own community". Neither side has offered any evidence, nor are there independent media reports. The defence ministry issued the latest death toll and details.

Despite its denials, it is likely that LTTE fighters carried out the attack. The Tamil separatist organisation is facing a desperate military situation in the Wannu region, where its fighters have been driven from its former strongholds and are boxed into a shrinking area near Mullaitivu. The attack on Karametiya followed an aerial attack on

Colombo by two LTTE light aircraft. One crashed into the Inland Revenue Department building and the other was shot down.

In the East, the army has controlled all formerly LTTE-held territory since mid-2007. The province is under military occupation, supplemented by the paramilitary forces of the pro-government Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (TMVP), whose leader has been installed as the provincial chief minister. The remaining LTTE fighters, who have been forced underground, have carried out sporadic attacks on military and police personnel, including from jungle areas near Karametiya.

Under conditions in which hundreds of Tamil civilians are being killed by the military in the northern war zone, it may be that LTTE fighters in the East lashed out at Sinhala villagers in Karametiya as a form of communal retribution. The LTTE has in the past carried out brutal attacks on Sinhala civilians, blaming the "Sinhala nation" as a whole for the 25-year war waged by successive Colombo governments.

The atrocities of the military, however, do not in any way justify the slaughter of Sinhala villagers. The Sinhala masses are not responsible for the war crimes of the Colombo government, which has forced working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—to bear the burdens of the war. The attack on Karametiya has provided a much-needed propaganda boost for the government, following protests and criticism over the rising toll of civilian casualties in the North.

The Colombo media seized on the Karametiya murders to inflame communal tensions. Local newspapers repeated the defence ministry statements, denouncing "LTTE terrorists" and adding their own demands for an intensified war and tougher security measures.

An editorial in the right-wing *Island* newspaper

criticised the European Union for proposing a humanitarian ceasefire, saying the LTTE would only drag out a truce indefinitely. "[The] massacre at Iginiyagala bears testimony to the fact that the LTTE still has death squads at its disposal. Last Friday, the LTTE by launching an abortive yet daring air raid demonstrated that it was still capable of suicidal terror," it stated.

The *Island*, which fully supports President Mahinda Rajapakse's war, has not the slightest hesitation in defending the military's war crimes, denouncing all evidence of its atrocities as LTTE propaganda.

None of the Colombo media accounts considered the alternative—that the murders at Karametiya were carried out by forces aligned with the government and the military. At the top of that list of suspects would be the TMVP, which is notorious for extortion, kidnapping and murder. This paramilitary force would have no compunction in killing villagers to provide fuel for government propaganda.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka condemns the killings in Karametiya, whoever was responsible. Acts of communal violence poison relations between working people and assist the ruling elites in imposing their reactionary agenda of war and free-market restructuring. Only by opposing all forms of nationalism and communalism can the working class unify independently of every section of the bourgeoisie and fight for a socialist alternative to the disaster created by the Rajapakse government and its predecessors.



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