

Sri Lankan government prepares broad attack on democratic rights

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Having declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan authorities are intensifying their attacks on fundamental democratic rights. The government has flatly ruled out any lifting of the country's state of emergency and the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which allows security forces to continue their arbitrary detention without trial of "LTTE suspects".

The continued persecution of Tamil civilians, political opponents and the media gives the lie to the Sri Lankan-sponsored resolution passed in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) this week that whitewashed the Colombo government's war crimes and abuses of basic rights. The resolution welcomed "the continued commitment of Sri Lanka to the promotion and protection of all human rights".

The UNHRC resolution ignored the fact that nearly 300,000 Tamil refugees have been herded into detention centres, guarded by troops and not permitted to leave. It also turned a blind eye to the record over the past three years of murders and "disappearances" by pro-government death squads and the torture of detainees. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned yesterday (see "UN body covers up Sri Lankan government's war crimes") that the resolution would only encourage the government and military to make further inroads into the legal and democratic rights of working people.

Speaking in parliament on Tuesday, Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva declared that the state of emergency and PTA would remain in force for "some months" as the security forces continued to conduct "mopping up operations, clearing operations". He added: "We'll have to arrest some more persons who had aided and abetted the LTTE."

The emergency laws give sweeping powers to the army and police to make arbitrary arrests and detain people indefinitely without charge or trial. The president can declare any strike or industrial action illegal by proclaiming the workplace as an essential service. He can block class actions against the government and state bureaucracy, and censor the media. The

PTA extends the powers of detention without charge and can be used to convict detainees solely on the basis of their confessions, in some cases extracted by torture.

De Silva told parliament that 9,100 persons had "surrendered" to the security forces in the detention camps. Even the limited reports filtering out from these centres paint an entirely different picture. Hundreds of people, particularly young men and women, are being dragged away by the security forces working with military intelligence, para-militaries and hooded informers. While the minister claimed 7,500 would be "rehabilitated," their fate, along with the remaining 1,600 detainees, is in the hands of the security forces, which operate with impunity.

Over the past three years, thousands of people, mainly Tamils, have been detained under the emergency regulations and PTA. Many have been held for months, even years, without trial. *Sunday Times* columnist J.S. Tissanayagam, for instance, is still in detention after he was arrested in March 2007 along with the owners of E-quality Printing Press, V. Jesiharan and his wife V. Valarmathi.

Far from "ensuring no discrimination against ethnic minorities" as the UNHRC resolution declared, the security forces treat all Tamils as potential "terrorists". The arrests are part of a broader campaign of harassment and intimidation that includes police sweeps, house raids and constant identity checks at roadblocks and on the streets. The 26-year civil war was a direct product of decades of official anti-Tamil discrimination that was exploited by successive Colombo governments to divide working people and shore up their own rule.

The opposition United National Party (UNP), which called for the end of the state of emergency this week, did not press the issue after the government ministers condemned the move as "very untimely". UNP leaders have enthusiastically joined in the jingoistic "victory" celebrations.

The UNP was responsible for launching the war in 1983 and employed the same anti-democratic methods when it conducted

military operations.

The army and police intend to step up their vendetta against anyone critical of the war, particularly in the media. In an interview with the state-owned ITN television channel on Monday, army commander General Sarath Fonseka branded journalists who have supported basic democratic rights as LTTE supporters and declared that the government planned to take action against them. They would not be allowed to leave the country, he added.

Fonseka alleged that “certain security analysts and other media experts, who were often demonstrating at Lipton Circus [in Colombo] for press freedom, have been constantly on the LTTE’s payroll to the tune of hundreds of thousand of rupees a month”. He accused them of “obstructing the legitimate activities of the army” and declared they “should be prosecuted for treason”.

On Thursday, Inspector General of Police (IGP) Jayantha Wickremeratne told ITN that the police had identified some of the “Sinhalese journalists” on the LTTE’s payroll. He claimed many of them had been connected with international organisations and had been always clamouring for media freedom. He accused them of “misreporting at the behest of the LTTE” that the army was shelling civilians while the LTTE was shooting at the fleeing civilians in order to “prosecute Sri Lankan leaders for war crimes”.

Wickremeratne declared that the “police know more details of this treason [but] I do not like to reveal all of them since it might obstruct further investigations”. These threats to prosecute journalists for treason are more broadly aimed at “international organisations” that in recent weeks have, at least in a limited way, exposed the government lies surrounding the army’s killing of Tamil civilians as it closed in on the last pocket of LTTE resistance.

The government, the military and Sinhala chauvinist groups have been bitterly hostile to the efforts of the European powers to instigate an investigation into war crimes in Sri Lanka—a move that was blocked in the UNHRC on Wednesday. On the same day, hundreds of Sinhala extremists gathered outside the Canadian High Commission, pelted it with stones, hoisted an LTTE flag and spray painted “LTTE headquarters in Colombo” on its wall.

Canada, along with the European powers, had backed the call for a war crimes inquiry, not out of any concern for human rights in Sri Lanka, but to advance Western economic and strategic interests in Colombo. However, the communal vitriol hurled at the Canadian High Commission is part of a broader campaign aimed at stamping out any criticism of the

government and the army, and silencing any exposure of their crimes.

These efforts are not limited to small groups of Sinhala extremists. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, a South African of Indian descent, became the target of communal innuendo in the Colombo press, implying she was an LTTE sympathiser when she mildly criticised the government’s record. In her address to the UNHRC calling for an inquiry, Pillay declared: “There are strong reasons to believe that both sides [the army and the LTTE] grossly disregarded the fundamental principle of the inviolability of civilians.”

The extent of the Sri Lankan government’s crimes is still coming to light. Previously leaked UN reports estimated that at least 7,000 civilians had been killed in the war zone in the period from January 20 to May 7. Thousands more died in the final days of fighting. A report this week in the London-based *Times*, based on UN sources, has created an uproar in Colombo ruling circles by putting the figure at more than 20,000.

The decision by the security forces to target journalists for “treason” is an indication that a broad offensive is being prepared against human rights bodies and non-government organisations, which are often accused in Colombo of being “terrorist sympathisers”. Arrest and prosecution will not be the only methods used. Government critic Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the *Sunday Leader*, was gunned down in broad daylight in January on his way to work. As in numerous other cases involving pro-government death squads, the police have made no arrests.

More broadly, the government is maintaining the police-state apparatus built up in the course of the war out of fear of rising social and political discontent. After 26 years of devastating civil war, most ordinary Sri Lankans are not joining in the victory clamour that the political and media establishment are attempting to whip up. As President Mahinda Rajapakse attempts to impose the economic burdens of the war and deepening global crisis on the working class, there will inevitably be resistance. The government is keeping the state of emergency in place to deal with the new “traitors”—protesting workers, farmers and students seeking to defend their living standards and basic rights.



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