

# Sri Lankan government launches “war on the underworld”

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The increasingly militaristic character of the Sri Lankan government has been underscored by its declaration of a “war on the underworld”. As stated by President Mahinda Rajapakse, the aim is to build a morally clean, disciplined and law-abiding society. The real purpose is to divert growing popular discontent and to justify the further strengthening of the state apparatus in preparation for social unrest.

At a meeting in Badulla on July 24, Rajapakse said: “We must have a society that is disciplined and respects our motherland.... When we want to stop [illicit] alcohol, we cannot think about votes. When we want to crush the underworld, we cannot think about votes.”

For more than three years, Rajapakse has used the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to suppress opposition to declining living standards in the name of “national security” and “defence of the motherland”. Now that the army has militarily defeated the LTTE, Rajapakse is resorting to right-wing “law and order” demagoguery for the same purpose.

Inspector General of Police (IGP) Jayantha Wickramaratne told the media that he had been directed by President Rajapakse and his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, to launch a “four-pronged operation” to tackle the underworld. The targets would be organised crime, day-to-day unorganised crime, illicit liquor and narcotics and traffic breaches.

Military intelligence will be involved, along with the Special Task Force (STF)—heavily armed police commando units, primarily used in the war against the LTTE. According to media reports, some 300 STF personnel have been assigned to the crackdown. A

number of special police teams have been formed as part of this war on crime.

Ominously, Wickramaratne also revealed that Rajapakse had instructed him to use the “same resources” as used against the LTTE to “deal with crime”. In the past three years, the pro-government death squads and paramilitaries, operating with the tacit approval of the security forces, have been responsible for hundreds of murders and abductions of Tamils, opposition politicians and journalists.

Highlighting the army’s involvement in this “war on underworld”, the newly-appointed chief of defence staff, General Sarath Fonseka, told the *Lakbima News*: “We took just two and a half years to finish the war [on the LTTE] and it won’t take us long to rid the country of the underworld. As of now, military intelligence is assisting the police.”

In the first three weeks of July, five alleged underworld gang leaders were abducted and killed. The Colombo-based *Sunday Times* reported on July 26 that the murders were the work of a group of persons simply known as the “unit”. While little information is available, the killings are widely regarded to be the work of the law enforcement agencies.

These killings are not the first. Over the past three years, a number of alleged criminals have died in police custody. The *Sunday Times* accused police of “dispensing shotgun justice” and playing the roles of “judge, jury and executioner”. The article noted that the story was virtually identical in each case: “Suspects turn on the police when they are escorted to identify weapons, narcotics and contraband. The suspect attempts to break free by lobbing a grenade at the police and is consequently shot dead.”

Chitral Perera, secretary of the human rights organisation Jana Sansadaya, told the newspaper that

such killings are treated as “justifiable homicide” and warned it was “a dangerous trend that could put innocent people’s lives in danger”. He insisted that a suspect should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

Police spokesman Ranjith Gunasekara claimed the police had acted in self-defence, saying the suspects were “armed and extremely dangerous” and would do anything when cornered. Gunasekara did not explain, however, why suspects acted the way they did knowing the police would kill them or why the shootings all followed the same pattern.

Official statistics do show rising crime rates, with 28,257 incidents, including homicide, abduction, rape, extortion and drug-related offences in the first six months of last year. The government, however, is attempting to portray the rise in crime as an individual moral question to deflect attention from the social impact of rising levels of poverty compounded by 26 years of civil war.

Over the past three decades, successive governments have implemented a pro-market agenda and slashed social spending, including on the country’s limited welfare measures. Unemployment and poverty have created a fertile recruitment ground for organised crime gangs, along with an estimated 65,000 army deserters with training and expertise in handling weapons.

There is also a symbiotic relationship between criminal gangs and politicians. Gang leaders need political protection and in return, carry out the dirty work for their patrons in dealing with opponents. *Lakbimanews* on July 19 noted that “*Kudu Lal* [drug Lal] has enough political clout and is a close associate of a minister—making dealing with him a difficult prospect, according to police”.

Sections of the media have backed Rajapakse’s “war on the underworld”, well aware that its prime motive is not the elimination of crime or criminals. An editorial in the right-wing *Island* on July 11 declared: “What is needed is not an occasional *ad hoc* foray into the underworld for a target killing but a sustained effort to wipe out all criminal gangs. Killing criminals here and there is not going to solve the problem of crime and drugs. An all-out war is called for! Whereabouts of all criminals in this country are fairly well known and rounding them up must be child’s play for a government which bagged an elusive [LTTE leader]

Prabhakaran in a relatively short time.”

The incessant use of the language of war by the government and the media is to provide the pretext for the increasing use of the security forces in every aspect of life. Far from demobilising sections of the army following the LTTE’s defeat, the government is expanding recruitment not only to strengthen the military occupation of the North and East, but for use against the working class.

While announcing a “war on crime”, President Rajapakse has also declared another war—an “economic war” to “build the nation”. The Sri Lankan economy, already burdened by huge military spending, has been hard hit by the global economic recession. To avert a foreign exchange crisis, the government was compelled to seek a large IMF loan, which has just been granted. The attached austerity measures make clear that Rajapakse’s “economic war” is directed at imposing the economic burdens on working people and suppressing any social unrest.

The “war on the underworld” serves to justify the continuing use of police-state measures, which will be inevitably turned on workers and the rural poor as they seek to oppose the continual erosion of their living standards.



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