

Sri Lanka: Thousands protest against police killings

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About 5,000 people took part in a funeral procession on Sunday at Angulana, a suburb south of Colombo, to protest against the brutal killing of two youth by police on August 13. The murders are the latest police atrocity in President Mahinda Rajapakse's fraudulent "war against the underworld".

M.B. Dinesh Tharanga Fernando, 22, and Dhanushka Udayanga Aponsu, 26, were arrested last Wednesday at about 10 p.m. by officers from the Angulana police post, after a woman complained that they had made a joke about her.

Damith Kumara told the *Daily Mirror*: "When they brought in the two youth I was in my cell. I could see more than five police officers kicking, punching and throwing things at them. Later the Police OIC [Officer in Charge] Newton of the Angulana Police came. They took them to the OIC's room. I heard them being beaten by the belt and the OIC shouted to another police officer to bring him fire, then he was burning and beating them from time to time."

Learning their sons had been taken to the police post and were being beaten, their parents rushed there at around 1 a.m. on Thursday. However, the police refused to let them see their sons and told them to come back in the morning. The two young men were taken out of the police post at around 2 a.m. The following morning Dinesh's body was found near a bridge one kilometre away and Dhanushka's body was on the seashore.

Sunil Kumara, the judicial medical officer who conducted the post-mortem, concluded that both bodies had multiple bullet wounds to the chest and legs. One had a bullet wound to the face and contusions.

Angulana is a working class area. Dinesh and Dhanushka were the sons of two sisters from the same family. Dinesh sold fish to make a living. Dhanushka was a gym instructor who was doing a vocational training course at the state-sponsored National Youth Service Council (NYSC).

Early on Thursday morning, an angry crowd of more than 1,000 people surrounded the police post to protest against the killings. People stoned the police post and blocked the southern Colombo-Matara railway line for more than half an hour.

The riot police and soldiers were rushed to protect the police post and rescue police officers, including the officer in charge

of Angulana police, G. V. Newton. At first the police tried to claim that the young men were part of the underworld but as tensions continued to rise they announced the arrest of five officers. The crowd only dispersed after a senior officer promised an "impartial inquiry" into the killings.

Before the funeral last Sunday, about 100 people held a picket on Galle Road near the Life Line Fitness Centre, where Dhanushka worked. They held up handwritten placards and shouted slogans, including "Stop killing innocents and labelling them as the underworld!", "Do police suppress the underworld or develop it?" and "Is this the road to the kingdom of justice?"

Protests were also held at other places in the area, including outside the Angulana police post. Hundreds of officers, including the riot squad and police commandos, were deployed to guard the police station. The funeral procession started from Dinesh's house and on the way people burned an effigy of OIC Newton.

M.B. Sangadasa Fernando, Dinesh's father, told the WSWs: "The police tried to label these two youth as members of the underworld. They are innocent. Dinesh studied up to ordinary level [at school]. Unable to find any other job he sold fish. Why did the police carry out this crime? We want them punished, and justice for our children. This type of crime must be stopped. As the police have been given powers to act in their own way, the government must be responsible for this crime."

Dhanushka's father, G.M. Saman Udayakantha Aponsu, who is a carpenter, said: "My son studied up to the advanced level. He liked sports and wanted to go ahead in that field. I dreamed he would marry and live happily. All my hopes have been broken. I have no faith that the investigations will bring justice for our children."

A fellow student of Dhanushka at NYSC denied the police allegation that he had made a joke about a woman: "He was very a disciplined student. His death is a great loss to us. The police are acting in their own way, using the power given by the government in the name of destroying the underworld. This must be stopped. If this continues, civilians will be forced to take the law into their own hands," he said.

Another local resident told the WSWs: "This is not the first or last such incident. It is not merely an issue of OIC Newton. This is police terror against the people of this country. Today I

am the victim and tomorrow it may be you. The ruling class has unleashed repression against the whole society. Amid the war [against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)], the government unleashed terror against the whole society.

“There is no democracy in the country. How many people have been killed in the recent past? Police kill them and say they were underworld thugs. No one challenges those killings in the courts. How many media personnel have been killed? The government promised an impartial inquiry and nothing happens. The people can’t trust the government’s promises. Therefore I think there should be a dialogue in society regarding these killings and people must take the initiative to stop these extra-judicial murders.”

The owner of the Life Line Fitness Centre said: “Dhanushka worked at my gym and he was very devoted to his goals. Now we have lost him. The people thought peace would come after end of the [civil] war but these killings show that it is not so. The government is bringing state terror from the North to the South. This must be stopped. We will continue our campaign until we get justice for those innocent youth.”

The murder of the two youth is not an isolated incident. During the war against the LTTE, death squads operating with the complicity of the security forces carried out hundreds of abductions and murders with the blessing of the government. Among those killed were journalists and opposition politicians. Now the government has unleashed its “war on the underworld” as part of a terror campaign directed against the masses.

On August 6, a police group abducted Nipuna Ramanayake, a student from the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT) at Malabe. According to Nipuna, he was brutally assaulted by several police officers, including Ravindu Gunawardena, the son of Colombo Crime Division director Vass Gunawardena.



Riot

squad protects Angulana police station

Later Nipuna was taken to a police station where an attempt was made to force him to sign a statement that he was

associated with an underworld figure. Nipuna’s mother intervened and the statement remained unsigned. On August 10, SLIIT students held a demonstration in front of their institution demanding that those responsible be charged.

To suppress the incident, President Rajapakse ordered police to take “speedy action”. A police chief and several of his officers have been transferred to police headquarters but no one has been charged.

The state-run *Daily News* published an editorial on Saturday attempting to deflect public anger from the police and government. “In any case, the IGP [Inspector General of Police] and senior officers should not allow a few bad eggs in the service to sully the reputation of the police as a whole... The police should weed out those who give a bad name to their noble service. A ‘clean’ police service is the need of the hour.”

On the same day, the *Island* wrote an editorial along similar lines, saying: “There are, of course, good officers and men in the department but their errant counterparts have ruined the image of the guardians of the law irreparably.”

The campaign of police terror is not the result of errant policemen, but rather a policy that has been sanctioned by the government. Last Thursday, media minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena continued to justify extra-judicial killings, saying: “Some things which are done for the betterment of the nation are forced to be done in an irregular way and some are inconvenienced.”

Rajapakse’s “war on the underworld” is the preparation for a deepening assault on the working class as a whole. The president has already announced another war—an “economic war” to “build the nation”—to impose the full burden of the country’s deepening economic crisis on working people. The police-state apparatus built up over a quarter century of civil war will be turned against workers, young people and the poor who seek to defend their living standards.

The author recommends:

Sri Lankan government launches “war on the underworld”
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