

Sri Lankan police forcibly drown a young Tamil man

Panini Wijesiriwardena
11 November 2009

The police killing of a young, mentally unstable Tamil man in central Colombo in front of television cameras has provoked widespread public outrage in Sri Lanka.

The incident took place on October 29 in the coastal suburb of Bambalapitiya. According to eyewitnesses, Balawarnan Sivakumar, 26, had been behaving erratically, dancing on the main highway and pelting vehicles and trains with stones to attract attention. When police arrived he backed off into nearby shallow waters.

Instead of taking him to custody and finding psychiatric care, the police forced him into deeper water. As hundreds of horrified onlookers watched, two policemen attacked him with long clubs and prevented him from returning to shore.

The whole episode was recorded by the private television channel, TNL, and broadcast on the evening news on the same day. The footage shows Sivakumar with clasped hands pleading in vain for his life. It ends as he finally submerges into the sea. His body was washed up the following day. (See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvjZAZ8svfk&feature=related>)

Sivakumar was born in Wellawaya in central Sri Lanka, the youngest son of tea plantation workers. When the plantation was turned over to forestry, the parents lost their jobs. His mother was killed in 1995 by an elephant while collecting firewood.

The family was impoverished. Sivakumar's elder brother Balawarnan Kadiragamanathan told the WSW: "We couldn't continue our schooling. I studied up to grade 8. But my brother had to give up his studies at grade 6." Sivakumar moved to Colombo at the age of 12, did several odd jobs and finally joined a motor spare parts shop as a mechanic.

Kadiragamanathan believes that his brother became distraught after a failed love affair. He was treated twice at a psychiatric hospital and recovered. However, on October 26, he again began to show signs of depression. Sivakumar had been

missing since October 27, two days before his tragic death.

The blatant police killing has aroused public anger. Thousands of comments about the incident have been published in the electronic and printed media, virtually all condemning the atrocity.

On November 4, hundreds of people demonstrated in front of Fort railway station in central Colombo. Among the slogans chanted were: "Slaughterers in khaki uniform, killers of the western shore" and "Yesterday Angulana, today Bambalapitiya and tomorrow...?"

The reference to the Colombo suburb of Angulana is to the deaths of two young men. They were taken into custody on August 13 as part of the government's fraudulent "war on the underworld". The two had been accused of harassing a woman. The following morning their tortured and bullet-ridden bodies were found dumped nearby. So far this year, 23 people have died in police custody.

Speaking about the latest drowning, an IT student told the WSW: "I watched the video clip of this incident over and over again. A civilised person can't watch the footage without being shocked. It clearly shows the brutality of the policemen. Similar incidents have been reported recently. In one case a university student was kidnapped and brutally abused. Luckily the incident was reported, but there are so many similar incidents that go by without our knowledge."

Following the killing of Sivakumar, the police and the media have gone into damage control. Every effort is being made to pin the blame on isolated individuals to deflect attention from the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The police have detained a sub-inspector and a constable over the incident and placed them in remand custody. Both were clearly visible in the television broadcasts. A preliminary police report is due to be submitted to court tomorrow. The police have also promised an investigation, but like so many other probes it will be a whitewash.

Various media commentators and editorials have attempted to explain away the atrocity. In an editorial entitled “The beast in man,” the *Daily Mirror* declared that the killing was the product of innate and irrational behaviour. “Summary justice, for some, is a manly thing. The truth remains that sadism or the pleasure gained by inflicting pain on another is one of the illogical and infantile behaviours of man.” In other words, there is no explanation.

An editorial entitled “Beach horror posers” in the *Sunday Island* came closer to the mark when it referred to the communal war waged by successive Colombo governments for more than two decades to suppress the island’s Tamil minority. The army defeated the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May.

That editorial commented: “That some sections in this country have begun to internalise criminality and inhumanity should not come as a surprise to the more discerning when the staggering toll from 30 years of war and destruction is taken into account. The problem has been compounded by the fact that some sections of the laws enforcement machinery have taken upon themselves the right to use brutal inhuman violence with impunity.”

The *Island* concluded with an appeal to the government to “exercise its authority” and “strengthen the Rule of Law”. The editorial continued: “The ‘war on terror’ served an important but limited purpose. The state cannot allow the violent ways which the war bred to be carried over into the Sri Lanka of the future.”

The comment reeks of cynicism and hypocrisy. The police killing of Sivakumar was not the result of the “internalised criminality and inhumanity” of isolated individual police officers, but the product of government policy.

Under the phony banner of the “war on terror”, the Rajapakse government tore up the 2002 ceasefire agreement, plunged the island back to war in mid-2006 and prosecuted it with unparalleled ferocity and complete disregard for civilian lives and well-being.

If low-level police officers believe they can get away with killing in broad daylight, it is because the Rajapakse government waged a criminal war with impunity. In the last months of the conflict, the UN estimates that at least 7,000 civilians were killed in the shelling and bombing of the so-called “no fire zone”. In the face of mounting evidence of these atrocities, Rajapakse and his ministers lyngly declared that the military killed no civilians.

Thuggery, corruption and criminality are part and parcel of the police-state apparatus built up over 26 years of war. The government has made harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrest, torture and murder, particularly of Tamils, part of the modus operandi of the security forces. Over the past three years, hundreds of people have been abducted, murdered or “disappeared” by pro-government death squads acting with the complicity of the police and military. No one has been charged, let alone convicted, in the vast majority of these cases.

It is no accident that Sivakumar was a Tamil. The security forces are deeply imbued with anti-Tamil prejudice, with many regarding every Tamil as a potential enemy. Again this is not the product of individuals, but of government policy. Ever since independence in 1948, successive Colombo governments have whipped up anti-Tamil communalism as a means of dividing working people. Decades of official discrimination are responsible for the eruption of war in 1983.

The treatment of Tamils as second-class citizens is highlighted by the fact that the Rajapakse government, with the support of the entire political and media establishment, is currently incarcerating in detention camps more than 250,000 Tamil civilians from former LTTE-held areas. All of them are being treated as virtual prisoners of war in flagrant violation of their constitutional and legal rights.

The end of the war has not brought the demobilisation of troops, but rather a continued build-up and flouting of democratic rights. A permanent military occupation of the North and East of the island is being prepared and the whole of society is being militarised. President Rajapakse has announced an “economic war”—to force the burdens of the country’s deepening economic crisis onto the backs of working people—and a “war on the underworld”—to justify the use of police-state measures against ordinary people.

The killing of Sivakumar is another sharp warning of the methods that will be used against the working class as it seeks to defend itself against the government’s worsening attacks on living standards and democratic rights.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact