

Sri Lankan military takes over urban development

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's self-proclaimed "economic war" to "build the nation" took on a new meaning last weekend when the Urban Development Authority (UDA) utilised soldiers and police to crack down on street hawkers, evict families from shanties in the Slave Island area of central Colombo and demolish 45 "illegal structures."

Significantly, the operation took place under the defence ministry, which took control of the UDA last week following the installation of the new Rajapakse government. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, one of the president's brothers, declared the shanties to be "eyesores" that had to be removed. Last weekend's eviction is part of broader plans to oust large numbers of slum dwellers and free up 1,000 acres of lucrative real estate in central Colombo for development.

While the eviction itself has been reported, the media has been virtually silent on the government's unprecedented move to place what has previously been a civilian function—urban development—under the control of the defence ministry. The decision is part of the steady militarisation of society and the government's use of military methods to impose its policies against any opposition or resistance.

President Rajapakse plunged the island back to civil war in mid-2006 and ruthlessly prosecuted military operations against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) resulting in thousands of civilians deaths. Following the LTTE's defeat last May, the government has maintained the country's huge defence apparatus, which acts as an army of occupation in the North and East and is now taking on civilian functions in the rest of the island. The military has around

300,000 personnel, making it one of the largest per capita in the world. Last year it consumed 21 percent of the government's budget.

While ending some wartime emergency regulations, the government has foreshadowed the indefinite continuation of the state of emergency. Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse, another of Rajapakse's brothers, told a Central Bank forum on May 9: "The president used his executive powers in the last three years to finish the war ... Now he wants to use his powers to economically develop the country ...". Among the key emergency powers that remain in force are a policing role for the military, detention without trial and the president's ability to ban industrial action by workers.

The defence ministry already controls the police along with the three military services. Now it has assumed control of the UDA which is responsible for planning and construction in urban areas, including Colombo and other cities such as Galle and Kandy. Already the defence ministry has announced that property in Colombo city can only be sold with its prior permission.

The defence ministry was also handed other civilian functions last week, including control over the Land Reclamation and Development Board, which supervises the sale of government land, and the registration of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the course of the war, the government and defence ministry repeatedly denounced local and international NGOs for their limited criticism of the military's abuses of democratic rights.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse revealed last week that the military would also play a role in foreign affairs. He told the state-owned *Daily News* that “the government has decided to appoint senior high-ranking military officers as ambassadors... [to countries] where LTTE activities were prominently in action.” As far as the government is concerned, any criticism of the Sri Lankan military or official discrimination against the island’s Tamil minority is tantamount to “LTTE activity”.

It is worth noting that Gotabhaya Rajapakse is not an elected politician, but an appointed state bureaucrat. As the top official in the powerful defence ministry, he wields considerably more clout than most government ministers. He is part of the presidential cabal that consists of top advisers, generals and other members of the Rajapakse family and has increasingly determined government policy with scant reference to cabinet or parliament.

In the six decades since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has previously had autocratic governments that trampled on basic democratic rights. However, the creeping militarisation of society under the Rajapakse government is without precedent. The Sri Lankan military is currently taking on powers that are only to be found in countries that are either currently under military dictatorship like Burma, or were previously, like Pakistan and Indonesia.

The Sri Lankan regime has emerged in response to the country’s deepening economic and social crisis. While the government boasts of its economic achievements, the protracted civil war has ravaged large areas of the island and left the economy heavily in debt. Last year Rajapakse was compelled to take out a \$2.6 billion International Monetary Fund loan to stave off a balance of payments crisis. Now the IMF is demanding that the government’s huge budget deficit be slashed from 9.7 percent of GDP last year to 5 percent in 2011.

Given the depth and sweep of the global economic crisis evident in Greece and Europe, the Colombo government has no alternative but to accede to the IMF’s demands. Rajapakse, who is also the country’s

finance minister, will be compelled to increase taxes, sell off state-owned enterprises or make huge cutbacks to public sector jobs, conditions and essential services such as education, health and welfare. The government will depend firstly on the trade unions and ex-lefts, and secondly on police state measures, to suppress the inevitable opposition of working people.

Last weekend’s eviction of urban poor in central Colombo is a warning of what is to come. Rajapakse’s “economic war” is not just a war in the metaphorical sense, but involves the use of the army and military methods to ram through economic measures against the opposition of the working class. Just as the shanty dwellers were denounced as “criminals” for opposing the destruction of their homes, so too workers will be branded as economic saboteurs and traitors for seeking to defend their jobs and living standards.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insists that the working class can only defend its basic rights by breaking completely with all factions of the capitalist class and building an independent political movement fighting for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies. The resort to the military to defend the interests of the corporate elite starkly demonstrates that capitalism has no future to offer workers and youth. Society must be reconstructed from top to bottom to meet the needs of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few.



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