

Sri Lankan government plans extensive slum clearance evictions

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Thousands of shanty dwellers in Colombo face the prospect of losing their homes and livelihoods as the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse implements its City of Colombo Development Plan. The plan, aimed at turning the capital into “the financial and commercial hub of the South Asian region,” is part of broader efforts to attract foreign investment and tourists.

The proposal was drawn up in 1999 by the Urban Development Authority (UDA), but shelved due to popular opposition and the ongoing civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The government signalled its intention to implement the plan through an official gazette notification in 2008.

After the LTTE’s defeat last May, Rajapakse declared he was going to conduct an “economic war” to “build the nation.” He placed the UDA, formerly a civilian authority, under defence ministry and installed his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, as UDA chairman.

The significance of putting the military in charge became apparent when hundreds of armed police and soldiers evicted 45 families from their homes on Slave Island in central Colombo on May 7. The defence ministry pulled down the shanties, which it declared “illegal structures,” and offered the occupants small wooden shacks in an area five kilometres away. When the residents refused, they were given money for annual rent and transport—100,000 rupees or \$US880.

The evictions were just the first step in clearing large slum areas for development by the “port related,

banking, financial and insurance sectors”. The UDA plan for the capital noted, “50 percent of its total population live in low income settlements consuming 11 percent of its total city land”. The UDA aims to “release” nearly 390 hectares of land occupied by shanty dwellers.

While the UDA plan does not spell out how the land will be developed, large portions will inevitably be handed over to major investors and property developers. Land sales in central Colombo are a lucrative business—one perch or around 25 square metres of land currently sells for between 1 million rupees (\$8,800) and 8 million rupees depending on location.

Tens of thousands of families who live in slums in different parts of the city, including on the banks of canals and the Kelani river, will be affected. Many of the shanties date back to before Sri Lanka’s independence in 1948, but their expansion was accelerated by the pro-market program that was implemented from 1977.

According to a 2004 Colombo Municipal Council survey, central Colombo had 1,614 poor urban settlements, which were home to 72,612 families or more than half a million people. Their children had no proper access to education. The average floor area for a family of five members was less than 350 square feet and they used common toilets and water taps.

Only 12 percent of those households, or 9,314 families, had a permanent source of income while 45 percent or 34,925 families had unskilled, irregular employment. Many do odd jobs such as day labouring

in small factories, cleaning or driving small three-wheeler taxis. Others are street hawkers or make a bit of money by sewing clothes or collecting scrap metal, paper and bottles.

Since that survey, many more people have been driven into Colombo by growing poverty and unemployment in the island's rural areas. The number of shanty dwellers increased by nearly 8 percent after the Asian tsunami lashed the country's eastern and southern coastlines in December 2004. Despite government promises, many victims were not provided with new shelters and employment opportunities.

When asked by the WSWs what would happen to the shanty residents, UDA director general Prasanna Silva claimed the government would provide "suitable shelters or compensation if they desire to settle beyond Colombo" and referred to three projects on the periphery of Colombo city.

However, these projects will not house the tens of thousands of people who will be displaced by the UDA's plans. So far only two new housing complexes—Sahasapura (Millennium City) and Dematagoda—have been constructed. Sahasapura was built in 2001–2002 but has only 676 units for families from 16 settlements. Residents say the units are inadequate and many are in need of repair. The government boasts that it was able to release 7 hectares of prime real estate worth 900 million rupees (\$US8 million) by relocating these families.

The government justified its latest evictions by declaring that the residents were "illegally occupying" the land. Defence Secretary Rajapakse branded the slums as "eye sores". For decades, however, successive governments have tacitly accepted the slums and done nothing to provide decent accommodation with proper utilities. Only now, as it wants to sell off the land, is the Rajapakse government raising the issue of "illegal" settlements.

Following the evictions last month, the government invented another excuse. Amid torrential rains, it began blaming slum dwellers for flooding in the city. On May 18, President Rajapakse ordered "relevant authorities to

evacuate residents living on canal banks to avoid flood disasters".

Irrigation and Water Resources Management Minister Nimal Sripala De Silva subsequently announced a program, in coordination with the defence ministry, to remove all "unauthorised" shanties from river banks, near marshes and on government land in Colombo and other areas. He claimed the slums were the "root cause" of the flooding and declared that illegal squatters would not be paid any compensation.

Following the Slave Island evictions, the defence ministry's Media Centre for National Security issued a statement, declaring: "The state emphasises that the removal of unauthorised residents from the land adjoining the Defence Services School in Malay Street was carried out yesterday [May 7] with a humanitarian countenance and on a legal and just basis."

This callous indifference to the plight of the Slave Island residents is a warning not only to other shanty dwellers but to the working class as a whole of the methods that will be used in Rajapakse's "economic war". Just as it is clearing and selling off prime real estate in Colombo city, the government is also under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to slash public spending and privatise state-owned enterprises. It will have no compunction in using the security forces to suppress any opposition from working people.



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