

# Sri Lanka: Mattakkuliya slum dwellers denounce police-military repression

**Our correspondents**  
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Sri Lankan police have announced plans to charge more than 200 local residents following the police-military roundup of thousands of slum dwellers in Mattakkuliya, a northern suburb of Colombo, on July 4. Those to be charged include 22 who were arrested and remain detained.

According to defence lawyers, the charges will include the theft of three police revolvers, damaging state property and being part of an “unlawful assembly”. Those found guilty of damaging public property can be jailed for up to 20 years and those convicted of “unlawful assembly” can be imprisoned for five years.

The police-military operation against Summitpura residents in Mattakkuliya followed protests over the brutal assault and detention of a local youth, M. Nishantha, by police on July 3. When local residents responded to the arrest by demonstrating outside the Mattakkuliya police station, Sri Lankan defence authorities seized on the protest as a pretext to deploy hundreds of police and troops in the area.

Scores of homes were raided and residents assaulted, and the next day some 8,000 people were forced into an open field surrounded by armed troops. Hooded men pointed out more than 200 people, who were then taken into police custody.

The round-up in Mattakkuliya marks a new stage of repressive measures against working people and youth by President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government. It is a graphic expression of emerging police-state rule, following the government’s criminal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the ongoing military occupation of the island’s mainly Tamil east and north.

The mass arrests and charges are aimed at intimidating all protests against International Monetary Fund-dictated economic austerity measures, which will mean deep social attacks on all sections of the working class and the poor. Summitpura is one of Colombo’s poorest districts and part of a government eviction plan to free up prime land for real estate investors. More than half a million people, or half of Colombo’s population, live in shanty town districts like Summitpura.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with M. Nishantha’s mother, A. Siriyawathie, last Friday. Until July 13, she was prevented from seeing her son, who has been detained at the narcotics section of the Magazine Prison at Welikada in Colombo, and then only allowed to speak with him for less than 10 minutes.

Siriyawathie told the WSWs that she saw marks on his body, indicating that he had been severely beaten. “He couldn’t walk unaided and all his fingers of one hand had been bandaged separately,” she said. “His face was swollen and blackened. He didn’t want me to visit him because I would be further saddened.” She explained that last year her son had been remanded for six months on frame-up drug charges after “police detained him with a packet of drugs that he didn’t possess”.

Other local residents who spoke with WSWs reporters rejected police allegations against Nishantha and accused the police of corrupt ties with drug dealers. They said that locals who complain about these anti-social activities are frequently harassed by police. Eyewitnesses to Nishantha’s arrest claimed that police attempted to force the youth to confess to drug possession. When he refused, he was assaulted and dragged off to the police station.

Local residents also condemned the major media, particularly the Sinhala-weekly *Irida Divaina*, for biased reporting. “The media didn’t report what we said. They published what police said or fictions narrated by them,” one woman told the WSWs. “When we saw the television reports, I was so angry that I felt like dashing the TV on the ground for not reporting what we said.”

Residents and Nishantha’s mother said they appreciated the WSWs and a few other media outlets for exposing the police provocation. “I think I was only able to see my son because of your exposure,” Siriyawathie said.

While 14 houses have been damaged by police, according to lawyers, the police have refused to accept residents’ allegations. Last week a magistrate ordered Colombo Criminal Division officials to allow victims to lodge complaints but some victims have been reluctant, fearful that they will be victimised by the police.

On July 5, the courts ordered the bail of 176 of the more than

200 arrested on July 4. Another 13 were released on July 14, after several identification parades, but on 100,000-rupee (\$US887) personal bail. According to police, the remaining 22 will be held in remand until at least July 28.

Defence lawyers told the court that the entire process violates basic legal principles because the police were both complainants and investigators of the case and all suspects were identified and arrested by the police for identification parades.

WSWS reporters spoke with several relatives of those detained. Mohamed Nasar, 22, Suresh Kumar, 30, and Chaminda Kumar, 20, all from the same family, remain in police custody. The family is typical of those living in the shanty town. Nasar works at tea stores on casual basis and on other days sells fish. Suresh is a labourer at a Colombo fish market. Their mother explained: “The families of my sons and daughter are living here. One daughter is working in the Middle East, and Nasar and Suresh worked to feed us. We have been placed in a very difficult situation following their arrests. They are innocent.”

Suresh’s sister said she was terrified when police raided their house on the night of July 3. She said police broke in the door and dragged Suresh and Nasar away. “When we opposed this, the police abused us. One officer put a pistol against my forehead and threatened to shoot me.”

Suresh’s mother said: “They [police] only allowed me to see my sons after four days. When we saw them, they couldn’t walk. Suresh’s lips were swollen and Nasar’s face was blackened.”

Nasar’s and Suresh’s parents previously lived near Bere Lake in central Colombo but were forcibly evicted and relocated to Summitpura during a “clearing” of the city for the Non-Aligned Movement summit in 1976. The mother said: “We lived with one of our aunties here. Their home was a hut built with wooden planks and coconut leaves. The government didn’t provide us with anything, just a small muddy plot of land. My husband was a mechanic and we had many difficulties, but after he died the situation worsened. As the children grew up, we were forced to rent a house. The rent for this house is 3,000 rupees.”

Suresh’s nephew, Chaminda, was also arrested on July 3. His mother, Pushpa Rani, told the WSWS: “The police smashed his wedding photos and took away the photographs. He couldn’t walk when I saw him.” He was released the next day.

The police arrested Rani’s 14-year-old son, Kalum Kumara, and her nephew, Kasun, 18—an orphan and asthmatic. They were detained when hooded men pointed them out during the July 4 round-up. They were later released but only after police forcibly shaved their heads. Many other youth and children had their heads shaved.

Unemployed worker, Pradeep Ruwan Perera, 22, is currently being held on remand. His mother, Wijeshwari, told WSWS

reporters that her son was arrested on the night of July 3 while at a friend’s house. “He was not involved in the incident. When police attacked the people he ran away with fear and was hiding in one of his friend’s place. He was beaten severely when detained.”

Wijeshwari, 40, is a labourer at a tea store and a widow. She suffers from breathing problems and can only work four days a week. She is paid just 100 rupees for packing 1,000 bags and says that her breathing difficulties prevent her from packing more. “The doctors told me it is because of the tea dust and they advised me to stop working there. But I can’t because I have no other way to live,” she said.

T.A. Romesh Sampath is also being held in remand. His wife, Indika, told the WSWS: “Sampath was arrested [on July 3] when he heard someone attacking our three-wheeler [taxi]. When he asked who was attacking the vehicle, he was dragged into a jeep. The police opposed him being granted bail.” Indika was arrested the next day at the assembly ground and jailed for two days.

There are no basic facilities for Summitpura residents, who still live in small wooden huts. There is a small dispensary but the residents have to travel to Colombo National Hospital for any medical treatment. There is no library, no vocational training or cultural programs for the youths, most of whom are unemployed.

The Urban Development Authority and Colombo Municipal Council have done nothing to improve living conditions in the area. Instead, residents will be evicted along with tens of thousands of families in other Colombo suburbs to release land for real estate developers. The redevelopment project is under the direct control of the defence ministry.

Locals angrily denounced the government repression. One woman said: “We can now understand how the military and police treated the Tamil people in the North and East. And I can also understand why they [Tamils] took up arms, because their problems were not solved.”

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges all workers and youth to oppose the police-state methods being implemented by the Rajapakse government and come to immediate defence of the Summitpura residents. The SEP demands the immediate release of those arrested and full compensation for all damage done to the residents’ homes and livelihoods. This requires the development of a unified political struggle against the government and in defence of the democratic rights and living conditions, on the basis of socialist policies that forge class unity among working people, across ethnic lines.



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