

Sri Lankan government to evict 66,000 families in Colombo

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President Mahinda Rajapakse's cabinet approved a defence ministry plan last week to evict 66,000 families from shanties in Colombo City and suburbs to release land for big business. Nearly half a million people will lose their homes and, in many cases, their livelihoods, as they are forced to move to uncertain alternative accommodation.

Announcing the decision on August 12, acting media minister, Anura Priyadarshana Yapa declared that the families were occupying "very valuable land in the City of Colombo in a haphazard manner". Initially, the government plans to lease 31.5 hectares at two million rupees a perch (about \$US18,000 per 25 square metres) to raise money to develop land for commercial development projects.

According to Yapa, a portion of the funds raised will be used to build houses for the families that have been evicted. Such promises are worthless, as has been demonstrated repeatedly in the past. For instance, according to opposition MP Sajith Premadasa, 11,000 families who lost their homes in the devastating 2004 tsunami are still living in refuges. Overall, there are an estimated one million homeless families throughout the island.

The scheme has nothing to do with "uplifting the poor". The purpose is to clear land in the centre of the capital to further the government's ambition to transform Colombo into a commercial hub for South Asia. The plan was originally announced in 1990 but had to be shelved due to popular opposition.

The government has involved the military precisely because it fears its plans will provoke resistance. President Rajapakse took the extraordinary step in May of

assigning the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the Land Reclamation and Development Board (LRD)—two civilian activities—to the defence ministry, which is controlled by his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

The defence ministry quickly exploited its new powers. In what was obviously a test case for the broader plans, 2,000 armed police and military personnel were deployed in May to evict 45 families from shanties at Slave Island in central Colombo. As homes were being bulldozed, police and soldiers baton-charged protesters and chased them out of the area. In Sri Lanka, the defence ministry also controls the police.

In July 2008, the police riot squad was used to evict 400 families in an area of Slave Island known as Glennie Passage. While some families have been given houses at Dematagoda, more than 80 families are living in small wooden huts without adequate basic amenities in North Colombo. UDA chairman Janaka Kurukulasuriya has announced that any families wanting to stay within the Colombo city limits will be forced to pay rent.

In another show of force last month, thousands of police and soldiers were mobilised following a protest at a local police station over the arrest and beating of a local youth. Scores of homes were trashed and residents assaulted in northern Colombo. The following day, armed troops rounded up all the adult residents in the area—around 8,000 people—and herded them into an open field where hooded informers picked out individuals allegedly involved in the protest. Many residents had already been issued with a UDA token indicating that they have been targeted for eviction.

Hundreds of families have been given eviction notices:

120 families in Apple Watta and Stadium Village in Colombo North; 500 families who live on the side of the Kelani Valley railway line; and 60 families in the Irrigation Quarters premises at the suburb of Ratmalana. No houses are available for their relocation.

The planned evictions have been accompanied by a vicious propaganda campaign by the government and in the media branding the urban poor as “squatters” who engage in anti-social and criminal activities. Their “unauthorised” constructions were held to be responsible for flooding and the spread of mosquito-borne diseases.

In reality, many families have lived in their shanties for years—in some cases for generations. Their squalid living conditions are the result of the neglect of successive governments, which have failed to provide basic services, including health care and education.

During the presidential and parliamentary elections in January and April this year, the government and opposition parties both promised to provide better housing and improved services in these shanty areas. Residents have expressed outrage at the latest decision to proceed with mass evictions.

A woman from Apple Watta told the WSWS: “If we had a better house in a better place, there would be no reason to live in this hell. But our means of earning a living and schooling for our children are bound up with living here.

“We don’t know where the government is going to relocate us. Why they can’t develop this area for us? Rather than blaming us they could clean these canals and build strong banks with concrete to prevent flooding.” She explained that some of her relatives who had been driven out of Slave Island were not provided with shelter.

A woman from the Dematagoda housing project explained that she and several other families housed there had been evicted in 2008 from Slave Island. They only received a house in January this year and did not have legal ownership. They had to pay 25,000 rupees upfront and another 6,600 rupees to connect the electricity. The rent is 1,000 rupees a month.

“There are 320 houses in this site,” she said. “In some houses there are two families. The size of a house is

nearly 400 square feet. This housing project is to be completed in four steps but only the first step has been finished so far. So, what will happen to the latest evicted families?”

The opposition United National Party (UNP) is posturing as a defender of the shanty dwellers. UNP parliamentarian Ravi Karunanayaka has told the media his party was supporting court cases against the eviction of 3,100 families from railway reservations. The UNP, however, has no fundamental difference with government’s pro-market economic agenda. Previous UNP governments have attempted to carry out their own slum clearance programs in central Colombo.

The involvement of the military in urban development is a sharp warning to the working class as a whole of the methods to which the Rajapakse government is turning to impose its policies. The Sri Lankan economy is facing a serious crisis as a result of huge military spending in the course of the government’s communal war, which ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in May last year.

Sri Lanka was also hit hard by the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008, with all major exports suffering. The Rajapakse government was compelled to accept a \$2.6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) last year to avoid a balance of payments crisis. Now the IMF is insisting that the budget deficit be halved to 5 percent of GDP in 2012.

The police-state measures developed in the course of the war are being used against some of the most oppressed and vulnerable sections of working people. The same methods will inevitably be employed more broadly against the working class as resistance and opposition grow to the government’s austerity policies.



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