

Sri Lankan government evicts street hawkers and shanty dwellers

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The Sri Lankan government recently approved a plan to evict 66,000 families from shanties in Colombo to make way for private developers and investors. At the same time, police have been deployed to clear the streets of hawkers to make the capital more attractive for tourists. The scheme will be extended to cities and towns in other parts of the island.

Significantly, this program is being implemented by the defence ministry, which has been given control of what is clearly a civilian activity—urban development. The methods that President Mahinda Rajapakse used to prosecute the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are now being employed against impoverished layers of working people.

WSWS reporters spoke to street hawkers at Panadura, where around 400 police, along with Urban Council and Road Development Authority officers, were deployed on August 16 to remove their stalls. The authorities refused to listen to the protests of the vendors, who explained that hundreds of families would lose their livelihood and starve. Panadura is about 30 kilometres south of Colombo.

According to A.H. Manjula from the Panadura United Traders Association, the hawkers were given just two days' notice but could not find an alternative place. Police threatened to use tear gas to break up the protest and arrest those involved. After the vendors backed off, the police tore down 117 stalls that sold clothes, fruit, toys and plastic flowers. Fruits and other items were badly damaged.

The authorities had attempted to move the vendors in

2008. But in the midst of the war, the government was concerned to avoid protests. The president's brother, Basil Rajapakse, intervened to halt the evictions. As one person explained, most of the hawkers voted for President Rajapakse and his party in elections earlier this year, but now the government is destroying their jobs.

At a meeting with the Panadura United Traders Association on August 18, Deputy Justice Minister Reginald Cooray warned: "I am not prepared to allow illegal activities for the sake of preferential votes. Unauthorised pavement stalls in towns country-wide are now being removed ... The law is applicable to everyone without any discrimination."

A 60-year-old vendor told the WSWS: "I went to that meeting. One person said that he had three children and without his small business place he could not live. That man asked [Cooray] to stop the injustice. But the deputy minister jumped on him, saying, 'If you cannot live why are you having children?' That is the attitude of the government towards the poor."

R.A.D. Wijepala, a stall holder, had been a victim of the 2004 tsunami that devastated much of coastal Sri Lanka. He said: "We have no illusions that government will allow us to start our businesses again. We are tsunami victims. Even after six years, I do not have a home. Many tsunami victims face a similar situation. We have to rent a house."

The crackdown on vendors in Panadura is part of an expanding program of evictions by the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and Reclamation and Land Development Corporation (RLDC), acting under

the defence ministry. Shanties have already been demolished in some areas, while elsewhere families have been issued with tokens, indicating eviction dates.

In May, police removed thousands of hawkers from the streets of the cities of Colombo, Kandy and Galle. In the same month, hundreds of police and soldiers evicted 22 families from an area of Slave Island in Colombo to build a school for military personnel. The government is creating a climate of intimidation and fear. Last month, thousands of police and soldiers rounded up all adults in the Mattakkuliya shanty area after a protest over the arrest of a youth. Hooded informers picked out people for arrest.

A WSWS team visited the Ratmalana irrigation department housing scheme to the south of central Colombo where people are facing evictions. Irrigation minister Nimal Siripala de Silva has directed officials to demolish all “illegal structures” in this housing scheme. The minister has also ordered the eviction of pensioners from the area.

About 60 homes have been branded as “unauthorised constructions”. Many of the residents have been living there for more than 20 years. They pay rates to the local council and electricity bills. The only reason their homes are “unauthorised” is because they lack a land deed. Many are garment workers, three-wheeler drivers and workers on a daily wage who cannot afford to pay rent or buy a house.

In one area, 11 small wooden huts are marked for demolition. The WSWS spoke to a group of single women, who survive by picking flowers and selling them at a local temple. Together they earn about 400 rupees (\$US3.50) a day.

Sandhya said: “We eat only [one meal] at night. If the government demolishes our houses we will have no place to go. We will be forced to beg in the town. This government even opposes begging. Recently some unidentified people have stoned and killed beggars.”

Another woman explained: “We voted for this government because they promised us to give deeds to our land. Now they are going evict us. I know about

some [other] evictions. Yes, this is [part of] a big plan. I can not sleep in night when I think about it.”

In their desperation, the women said they were trying to meet with Housing Minister Wimal Weerawansa, who has been visiting various areas, trying to deflect rising anger. Weerawansa, who has a long history of populist demagoguery, has been promising to provide houses for people targeted for eviction. However, neither he nor his ministry have any concrete plans to house the hundreds of thousands of people who will eventually be forced to move. The handful of families evicted from Slave Island in May have not been given alternative accommodation.

Street vendors face the same desperate situation. Mahinda Kahandagama, president of the association representing Colombo street hawkers, explained that about 6,000 people were evicted more than four months ago, but only 289 have been given a substitute location in Colombo for their businesses. “We are very worried. Many families are helpless. We asked the president [Rajapakse] to provide us with an alternative, but all he said was that he would ‘consider’ it.”



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