

# Sri Lankan government wages “war on drugs”

W.A Sunil  
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Under the guise of an island-wide “war on the drug mafia”, the Sri Lankan police have conducted a wave of searches and arrests, particularly centring on Colombo city and surrounding suburbs. The campaign directed by the government is to justify the further strengthening of the state apparatus amid rising popular discontent over deteriorating living standards.

The police narcotic bureau recently told the media that during operations between October 13 and 25, 7,098 persons “believed to have possessed narcotics and [to be] involved in the trade” were arrested. Police claimed they had recovered various types of narcotics after raiding hundreds of distribution points. Thousands of police have been involved.

In Colombo city, the police have targeted impoverished shanty areas, including Slave Island, Maradana, Madera and Mattakkuliya. The focus is not accidental. As part of its preparations for the mass eviction of 66,000 families, the government and the media have conducted a vile campaign slandering Colombo’s urban poor as drug peddlers and criminals.

On October 22, 1,300 police, including heavily-armed special task force (STF) personnel, conducted a seven-hour sweep operation in the Colombo suburbs of Panadura and Mount Lavinia. Starting at 3 o’clock in the morning, police blocked off the area and systematically went house to house, interrogating residents. Just 16 people were detained on suspicion of drug dealing, mainly youth from Badovita, a shanty settlement in Mount Lavinia.

Residents who spoke to the WSWs were angry and bitter. The police deployment recalled the huge cordon and search operations repeatedly conducted by the security forces, particularly in predominantly Tamil areas, during the country’s protracted civil war that ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May last year. The same police-state measures are now becoming the

norm throughout working class neighbourhoods.

One woman told the WSWs: “The police came to our area at about 6 a.m. There were hundreds of police officers. All the entry and exit points had been blocked. While police officers in uniform came to our houses there were officers on the roads in civilian clothes. Those who came to the houses checked everything and took down the names and national identity card numbers of the residents. Police asked whether we were selling drugs and whether we knew people who did.

“Some people might be doing such things out of poverty. We live day to day on our income. I sell string hoppers [a Sri Lankan staple food]. My husband drives a three-wheeler taxi. On that day he was at his three-wheeler parked near the junction. I was waiting for him to take my string hoppers to a teashop. As he was late, I went to find him. I saw that police officers in civilian clothes had dismantled every part of the taxi to check whether my husband had concealed drugs in it. So we had to get it fixed and we lost our entire income that day.”

Another woman said: “We are pleased to see the area free of drugs and criminal activities. But I think that without alleviating poverty you can’t eliminate those anti-social things.”

About 1,700 families live in this shanty area in Badovita with limited access to basic facilities such as clean water, sewerage and electricity, and services such as health care and education. Unemployment, underemployment and poverty are rampant. Many of the families were moved to the area as a result of slum clearances in Colombo city by the previous United National Party government in the early 1990s.

A retired municipal worker told the WSWs that police harassment was frequent. “When police are patrolling in this

area young people on the streets are arrested without reason. There are hundreds of unemployed youth in this area. The recent police operation reminds us of the war. In those days, the police and army did the same thing.”

More than a year after the LTTE’s defeat, the government has maintained the state of emergency that give President Mahinda Rajapakse sweeping powers, including indefinite detention without trial. Police surveillance and regulation is intruding into every aspect of public life as part of an increasing militarisation of the country.

The defence ministry, which controls the police, recently issued a series of new rules and regulations. All citizens across the country have to register with the police. Forms are being distributed. This type of registration was imposed on the Tamil minority, who were all treated as “enemy” during the civil war. Now the same police supervision is being extended to everyone.

The defence ministry has also issued a circular ordering the registration of all mobile phone SIM cards by December 31, with details of the owner’s residential address and national identity card number. The regulation limits the number of SIM cards per individual to five.

Telecom Regulatory Commission chairman Anusha Palpita told the media that he was not certain under what law the directive had been issued. However, as it was a matter of national security, he said, the Commission would not hesitate to take action against any violators of the regulation.

Police also started installing CCTV cameras last month in Colombo to monitor traffic and the public. The surveillance “will trigger immediate action if there are traffic congestions or disturbances in the city,” police spokesman Prishantha Jayakody said. High-ranking police have studied the use of CCTV surveillance in Singapore.

A separate “environmental police” section has been established, supposedly to monitor the dumping of garbage and keep the environment clean. Its political purpose became clear last week when police stopped members of the Inter Company Workers Union (ICWU), connected to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), from distributing leaflets in Colombo. The reason given was that they were “polluting the area” as people dropped leaflets on the road.

The government has decided to establish a military and police special task force presence in every district. Speaking

in Anuradhapura on October 2, Army Commander, Major General Jagath Jayasuriya, said: “A decision has been taken to establish at least one army division and an STF camp permanently in each district.” He added: “The plan to increase the presence of military personnel in the south [of the island] is a part of the new national security arrangement conceptualised by the defence secretary.”

The defence secretary is Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who wields extraordinary powers through his control of the security forces and his family connection as the president’s brother. He is responsible for the widespread abuse of democratic rights during the war against the LTTE, when death squads acted with the complicity of the military.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, an unelected state bureaucrat, often makes pronouncements on government policy. To justify the continuing build up of police-state measures since the war, he insists that “political stability” is needed for economic development. The chief target is the working class, which is being forced to bear the burden of the country’s economic crisis.

The government is due to bring down the budget on November 22, containing new austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The country’s public debt soared as a result of President Rajapakse’s heavy spending on the military and the impact of the global economic crisis on the island’s economy. The IMF is insisting that the budget deficit must be slashed from 10 percent of gross domestic product to 5 percent in the next two years.

The government has already indicated that it will cut price subsidies, speed up the restructuring and privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and impose new taxes on essential items. At the same time, defence expenditure will be increased by another 7 percent to 215 billion rupees (\$US1.9 billion)—more than 20 percent of total expenditure. The money is to finance the repressive measures that are being prepared against the popular resistance that the austerity budget will inevitably produce.



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