

Sri Lanka: Terror campaign against Tamils reemerges

S. Jayanth
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Death squads operating in collusion with the military have once again begun to terrorise Tamils in the North and East of Sri Lanka despite the end of the war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009.

During December, a spate of killings, abductions, disappearances and robberies has occurred in the northern Jaffna peninsula. Similar incidents also have been reported from the Kilinochchi, Mullaithivu and Mannar districts that were previously held by the LTTE.

After President Mahinda Rajapakse restarted the war in mid-2006, hundreds of people, including politicians and journalists, were abducted or murdered by such hit squads, typically operating with white vans or on motorbikes. Invariably, despite the heavy wartime military presence, the killers escaped and were never brought to justice.

The list of recent attacks includes:

* The chief priest of the Murukamoorthy temple, Nithiyananda Sharma, 56, was shot dead in the temple at Chankaanai and his two sons were injured by an armed gang on December 11. The gun used to kill him was similar to those issued by the army. Jaffna security forces commander Major General Mahinda Hathurusinghe denied any army connection, but he later admitted that an army corporal had been involved.

* Markandu Sivalingam, a deputy director of education in the Valikaamam Zone, was shot dead at his home at Urumpirai in Jaffna by an armed gang on December 26. The police have not arrested anyone. Tamil National Alliance MP, E. Saravanabavan, told parliament that Sivalingam could have been slain because of his opposition to forcing Tamil school students to sing the national anthem in Sinhala during the recent December 2004 Tsunami Remembrance Day in Jaffna.

* Mahendiran Selvam, 28, was found dead at Meesalai last month. His family had received calls demanding 8.5 million rupees (\$US76,000) in ransom after he had disappeared. Rasiah Chandrasiri, 42, was found hanged three days after his disappearance in Jaffna on December 30.

* On New Year's Eve, postal worker and environmentalist Ketheeswaran Thevarajah, 28, was killed by an armed gang in his home at Vadamaradchi on the Jaffna peninsula. On January 3, Mahalingam Amirthrasa, 35, a father of five, went missing in Urumpirai.

* In Mannar on January 6, six people were abducted by a gang in a white van. Others tried to rescue them, but were threatened by the abductors who shot into the air. Several people followed the van, which was allowed to pass a military checkpoint without being searched. Five of the six were handed back to their families by police the next evening, after being taken to Colombo.

* On January 20, the newspaper *Veerakesari* reported that an unidentified gang in a white van had grabbed two students in Mannar and beaten them. The abductors asked one of the students about his father, a businessman who was reported missing four years ago. The students were released on January 17.

The military is also actively collecting details about former LTTE supporters who have been released and are living in Jaffna. After the war, the military arrested about 12,000 Tamil youth and sent them to secret detention camps, where they held without trial and interrogated. The government recently claimed that it had released about 5,000 detainees. But they have been ordered to report to the detention camps weekly or even daily and are still in danger.

Some former detainees have complained to the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission (HRC) branch in Jaffna and sought protection. On January 10, a judge ordered a 32-year

old man to be placed in protective custody after he asked for the HRC's help. He had been hounded by a pro-government gang because of his earlier affiliation to the LTTE.

The Jaffna peninsula is under tight military control. A force of about 40,000 soldiers is deployed, with troops manning every junction and patrolling in vehicles. Paramilitary forces from the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), one of the government's coalition partners, operate with the military. Tens of thousands more soldiers have been deployed in the Vanni district. The killings and abductions cannot possibly take place without the military's knowledge.

Facing growing public discontent over the criminal attacks, EPDP leader Douglas Devananda, a government minister, attempted to deflect attention from his organisation's activities. Speaking in parliament on January 4, he called on the security forces "to bring to justice those who are responsible for these murders".

Major General Hathurusinghe, the Jaffna commander, also denied the responsibility of the security forces, blaming "criminal activities by civilians" and "personal disputes" for the murders and disappearances. At the same time, he declared: "The army is also continuing to look for pro-LTTE elements in the peninsula."

Government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella absurdly told a media briefing on January 7 that the killings were the responsibility of "anti-government elements" who were trying to tarnish the government's image. He provided no evidence for the assertion.

The attempt by the government and military to deny responsibility flies in the face of a series of reports by international human rights organisations over the past four years that have provided considerable evidence for the operation of pro-government death squads who have been able to abduct and kill with impunity.

A secret US diplomatic cable recently published by WikiLeaks demonstrated Washington's knowledge of the Sri Lankan government's collusion with paramilitary groups. Former US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Robert Blake, sent a memo in May 2007 to the US State Department identified the EPDP and other paramilitary groups as involved in extra-judicial killings along with a range of other criminal activities including prostitution, drug running and extortion to which the government and security forces turned a blind eye.

The cable reported that Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, ordered Jaffna military commanders to "not interfere with the paramilitaries on the grounds that they are doing 'work' that the military cannot do because of international scrutiny"—in other words extra-judicial killings and other illegal activities. The defence ministry also instructed top officials "not to interfere with operations of military intelligence", which worked closely the paramilitaries. The paramilitaries also operated in Colombo, where, according to Blake: "Frequent abductions by paramilitaries keep critics of the GSL [Government of Sri Lanka] fearful and quiet."

The escalating death squad activities over the past month take place amid rising public dissatisfaction over the government's driving down of real wages, social spending and living standards in order to implement budget-cutting measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Living conditions and the lack of basic democratic rights impact especially on Tamils in the war torn North and East of the island.

The government is seeking to whip up anti-Tamil sentiment, accusing the remnants of the LTTE of conspiring internationally against it. The communal campaign is not only aimed at dividing working people, but justifying the continued state of emergency in the country and the military occupation of the North and East.

In another chauvinist provocation, the cabinet recently adopted a proposal by President Rajapakse that the national anthem should be read in the Sinhala language in every part in the country. It was customary to sing a Tamil translation of the anthem in the North and East, where the overwhelming majority of people do not speak or understand Sinhala.

Far from the military annihilation of the LTTE in May 2009 leading to a new period of peace and prosperity, as the government claimed it would, communal repression has continued to deepen, with far-reaching implications for the basic and democratic rights of the entire working class.



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