

Sri Lankan military attacks Tamil villagers

Subash Somachandran
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The Sri Lankan army brutally attacked villagers at Navanthurai in northern Jaffna on the night of August 22 after tensions broke out between the army and local people. It was the first major assault on Tamil civilians by the military since the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May 2009.

At around 9.30 p.m. villagers chased some strangers, some of whom ran toward a nearby army camp. The military denied that the individuals ran into the camp. Hundreds of people gathered near the camp and protested, blocking a military vehicle that attempted to take away some soldiers in civilian clothes, an eyewitness told the WSWWS.

The army attempted to force people away but failed. Soldiers, backed by police, then fired shots into air to disperse people.

After midnight, Navanthurai's population was rounded up by hundreds of soldiers, who shot in the air and entered houses, breaking doors and dragging men away. The round-up recalled the wartime repression carried out by the military. Wives, mothers and children were also attacked when they tried to stop people being taken away.

Later, all those arrested were taken to a nearby playground and physically attacked until 3 a.m. Among them were patients suffering from paralysis and back pains. Some were undressed and assaulted. Balathurai Syagayarasa was naked in front of his mother when he was beaten. Detainees were later brought to a police station and subjected to another round of beatings.

More than 100 people were admitted to Jaffna Hospital under police custody. According to the judicial medical officer, S. Sivarooban, 22 people had bone fractures and many had internal injuries and head wounds. He said the injuries were caused by rifle butts,

iron clubs, wires and shoes.

There has been widespread panic across the country during the past three weeks, caused by mysterious people intruding into villages, towns and plantations, sometimes breaking into houses. Residents have complained that these persons attacked them, particularly women, with sharp nails or blades and ran away.

According to eyewitnesses, some of these strangers wore masks, and some had applied grease to their bodies so residents could not catch them. For that reason, the intruders have been dubbed "grease devils."

The police have been informed about these incidents but brushed them aside, saying people had succumbed to rumours. Many incidents have taken place in areas where Tamils live, including the North, East and the central hills plantation districts. After arousing suspicion, some intruders fled to the nearest military camps or police stations when people tried to catch them. About three people have died in these incidents, including a police officer, and several have been injured.

After the attack at Navanthurai, the military and the police imposed a curfew for two days and deployed heavily-armed soldiers. The market did not function, shops were closed and fishermen stayed at home. No one was allowed to move on the roads. Many villagers crowded into the hospital to see their relatives and neighbours.

Several incidents in Jaffna point to the military's complicity in creating tension. On the same night, a stranger was caught by villagers entering a house at Aalangkaddai. He claimed to be from army intelligence. Soldiers arrived in a white van and fired warning shots to rescue him from protesters.

Similar events were reported in the villages of Karaveddy, Polikandi and Karahaththanpulam, where three thugs appeared with their faces covered with

cloth. Such people cannot move around without the knowledge of the security forces. The military occupation of the North and East has only intensified since the LTTE's defeat. The checkpoints, sentry points and mini-camps are still functioning in these areas.

At Navanthurai, Broon, a mechanic who suffered a fractured leg and internal injuries, told the WWS: "I heard gun shots and people shouting. Just as I felt signs of danger, the door of my house was broken. They arrested me and my cousin and assaulted us indiscriminately. They did not care about weeping women but attacked them as well. Both my cousin's hands were fractured. Many soldiers attacked me at the playground too."

Ninety-one detainees were produced before the courts after four days and released on bail. They had to pay sureties of 5,000 rupees. Even so, the court imposed conditions, requiring them to report to the police once a week. Ten people who were still hospitalised were ordered to be detained until September 6.

The police opposed bail, accusing the prisoners of damaging state property and mobilising people to wage war against the government. More than 30 lawyers appeared in support of the victims.

Addressing the parliament on August 23, Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian S. Sridharan insisted that people had enough evidence to say that the mysterious individuals were military men. He added that two armed people had entered houses in military-occupied town of Parathipuram at Kilinochchi and when people tried to catch them, they were saved by the military.

Responding to Sridaran, Dinesh Gunawardane, a cabinet minister, ridiculously asked him to name the mysterious persons, if they were from the military. Addressing a public meeting, Justice Minister Rauf Hakeem blamed the media for spreading such rumours.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse had encouraged the use of military repression, by warning that people "who take the law in to their hands will be severely punished." After the Navanthurai incident, he declared that those "who carried out campaigns about the 'grease devils' will be considered as terrorist groups." He insisted that "severe action will be taken against the people who carried out attacks against the army camps and police stations."

Jaffna security forces commander Mahinda Hathurusinghe went further. He warned: "Those who were armed with clubs, stones, swords, knives, sand and petrol-filled bottles for the purpose of attacking law enforcement officers will be branded as terrorists and no mercy will be shown to them." He went on: "We [the army] will never allow anyone to take the law into their hands" and "fulfil the ulterior motives of frustrated war mongers."

The Island newspaper seized on the issue to whip up communalism, branding the protesters as "LTTE members". Its headline stated: "Army thwarts 'Pongu Tamil' style raid on Jaffna detachment—Students among attackers." The Pongu Tamil (Tamils Rising) slogan had been displayed by the LTTE and its supporters when they occupied some areas in the North and East.

Speaking to the WWS, a lawyer explained: "The 'grease devil' has been created by the government. They attacked the people and then tried to charge them and show that protesters will be suppressed in such a way." He pointed out: "Political critics can be murdered by the so-called grease devils without any evidence."

Interviewed by the WWS, a woman from Navanthurai asked why the mysterious individuals should run to the military camp if they were not sent by them. "The government does not allow us to live peacefully. We explained our problems to the government ministers who came during the election campaign. They are now silent. Only about 100 from Navanthurai were admitted to hospital but most are staying at home with their injuries, fearing they will be arrested if they go to hospital."

It appears certain that the government and the military are creating these incidents to terrorise and intimidate Tamils, whose anger is growing against the continued military occupation, the curbing of democratic rights, the devastation left by the war and the continued detention of thousands of Tamil youth.



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