

Sri Lankan opposition party backs Colombo slum evictions

Vilani Peiris

19 December 2011

After posturing during elections just two months ago as opponents of the government's plans to evict tens of thousands of slum dwellers from central Colombo, the opposition-dominated Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) has revealed its collaboration in the process.

The complicity of the United National Party (UNP)-led council emerged as the national government of President Mahinda Rajapakse prepared to remove 400 poor families living along a fuel pipeline. The evictions are being enforced by the Urban Development Authority (UDA), which is under the command of the defence ministry, headed by Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother.

Last month, two oil leakages were reported on the main pipeline from Colombo harbour to the Ceylon Petroleum Cooperation (CPC) oil storage facility. One leak was visible in a shanty area at Blumenthal and the other appeared near shanties in the same vicinity. The oil pipeline runs parallel to a railway line. Families who have built homes along this rail line at Blumenthal, Modara, Mattakkuliya and Ferguson Road are facing eviction.

Since 2009, the UDA and the CPC have tried several times to evict these families, accusing them of being "unauthorised" dwellers. However, the settlers defied the government and demanded new houses within Colombo city before leaving.

Now the UDA has seized upon the oil leaks as a pretext, claiming that people must vacate the area for safety reasons. In reality, the removals are part of a broader government plan to evict about 75,000 families living in shanties throughout Colombo, in a bid to transform the city into a South Asian commercial and business hub to attract foreign investment and tourists.

The government's eviction plan was the central issue during the CMC elections in October. President Rajapakse's

ruling coalition denied that it had a plan for mass removals, and promised to build new houses within Colombo. Most residents refused to believe the government's promises. Without much faith in the right-wing UNP either, they nonetheless voted for the opposition, which claimed to oppose forcible removals.

Once in office, the UNP started working with the UDA on its plans. UNP Deputy Mayor Titus Perera told the *Sunday Leader* that the CMC would hold a discussion with dwellers to convince them of the need for a "possible evacuation." He claimed that the UNP would support the evictions to protect "the safety of the people" living along the pipeline.

On November 28, the CMC sent a group of university students, appointed as researchers, to gather information from the families in the area. They asked residents about their living and social conditions and pasted UDA labels on the walls of houses. These stamps indicate the structures are marked for demolition. When people questioned the students, they said the houses were to be removed and that residents would receive replacement homes from the UDA.

Lankadeepa, a Sinhala daily, reported, however, that the railway department would take measures to oust the families and the government would resettle "them somewhere" with a financial grant. The railway department sought a court order in 2009 to evict 344 families, but the residents refused to vacate unless they were provided with suitable houses.

One resident told WSWs reporters that people did not trust UDA promises to provide alternative houses. "If they are going to give us new houses, where have they built them?" he asked. "We don't see any such houses. They are going to dump us somewhere, just like the government did to those evicted from Slave Island and other places."

In 2008 and 2010 the government evicted hundreds of families from two Colombo shanty districts, Slave Island

and Dematagoda, mobilising the police and army to suppress resistance. Some evictees were sent to temporary wooden huts at an unsuitable and distant area in the Colombo suburbs without basic facilities. They are still living in these squalid houses.

Like other shanty dwellers in Colombo, the families living around the oil pipeline have resided there for decades without basic facilities such as schools and health services. Most of the houses, averaging only about 20 square metres, have been built of wooden planks and roofed with tin sheets. Some houses have been built with bricks. All are crowded and lack ventilation and drainage systems. Mostly, families must use communal water taps for washing and drinking.

Most residents lack permanent incomes. They work as casual labourers in factories or street hawkers, or collect discarded materials, such as iron, paper and empty bottles, to sell. A few drive three-wheeler taxis. Most of the women toil as sanitary workers in offices, while others sell fast food and sweets. Unemployment is rampant among the young people.

The oil pipeline was laid more than 50 years ago, and leaks have been reported several times in recent years. Despite the obvious dangers, families live there because they have no other place to go. Their plight is an indictment of the entire ruling elite. Successive big business governments under the UNP and Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party have cynically exploited these people, repeatedly making false election promises of decent housing.

UDA officers recently visited the area and told residents they should not be afraid of Defence Secretary Rajapakse because he had promised to provide new homes. The fact that the UDA and the Land Reclamation and Development Board were placed under defence ministry control, was precisely in order to use the army to carry out the evictions, as already seen at Slave Island. The use of the military for civilian purposes is one more sign of the militarisation of society in the wake of the protracted civil war against the Tamil population in the north and east of the island.

Most significantly, the officials asked residents to form organisations under the direction of the UDA to obtain houses, and warned them not to join any other organisation or talk about their problems with other people. The Rajapakse regime is clearly worried about the formation of independent committees and particularly the Socialist Equality Party's campaign to mobilise the residents and the entire working class to oppose the evictions.

Against the ruling parties of Sri Lankan capitalism, which are committed to the budget-cutting and pro-market restructuring dictated by the International Monetary Fund, the SEP has advanced a socialist perspective. This is the only way to meet the basic needs of all people in modern society to decent houses with sanitary and other facilities, secure employment, and good schools and health care.

Residents told the WSWS that local UNP supporters were currently denying that their party had promised to provide new houses. One disgusted resident displayed newspaper cuttings of UNP advertisements during the recent CMC election campaign promising to build 66,000 houses for slum dwellers.

A resident commented: "The UNP doesn't want to come to our defence. We know the dangers in this area. Our houses are three or four feet away from the railway line. Some houses have even been built on the pipeline. But we are compelled to live here, as we have no other suitable place to go.

"Now the government is trying to dump us somewhere without considering our necessities. Our jobs, children's schooling and everything are bound with this area. If we are uprooted and dumped in a distance location we will face many difficulties."

A woman declared: "The government should give us houses with all the facilities. Look! We are living in temporary huts. There is a dirty canal. The area is full of mosquitoes and garbage. We don't want to go to unsuitable wooden houses. I know that location. It is muddy and people have to use overflowing common toilets. Why should we have to move from a shanty to another hell?"



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact