

Sri Lanka's defence secretary targets workers and youth

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In a recent speech, Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse highlighted the "threat to our national security" posed by attempts to "create [political] instability" as in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Remarks by the top defence official, the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, are an ominous warning that the government is refocusing its police-state apparatus, built up over a quarter century of civil war, against protests by workers and youth.

The defence secretary's speech, entitled "Future challenges of national security in Sri Lanka," was delivered in Colombo on January 11 before top military officers, state bureaucrats and others. It was widely publicised and broadcast on all private and state television stations on January 13.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse was chiefly responsible for prosecuting the government's communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), along with former army commander Sarath Fonseka, who has since fallen out of favour and been imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Rajapakse is part of the military-political cabal—including the Rajapakse brothers, senior generals and state bureaucrats—that runs the government.

The timing of the speech was significant. Unrest among workers and youth is growing. In the same week, thousands of university students held demonstrations to oppose the government's privatisation of university education. Plantation workers also held protests against the imposition of increased workloads.

On Tuesday, university teachers came out again to press for a salary increase and to show opposition to a private university bill. On Wednesday, thousands of the

electricity and water board workers demonstrated in Colombo, demanding higher wages. The government is calculating how to suppress these struggles.

Rajapakse began his speech by referring once again to the "threat" of the revival of the LTTE abroad and in the country. Such comments are mandatory as the government needs to constantly stir up anti-Tamil communalism—the chief weapon used by the ruling elite for decades to divide the working class and rural poor, and block a unified struggle to defend living conditions and democratic rights.

The government restarted the war in 2006 and up until the LTTE's defeat in May 2009 constantly exploited the "threat of terrorism" to justify the suppression of strikes, with the assistance of the trade unions.

The defence secretary warned his audience that although the LTTE had been crushed, "not to take it for granted" that it could not re-emerge. He claimed there were "on-going activities" of LTTE-linked organisations outside Sri Lanka—naming groups such as the Transitional government of Tamil Eelam, the British Tamil Forum and the Tamil Eelam People's Assembly.

Rajapakse declared that the aim of these groups was "winning international opinion for the separatist cause, increasing international pressure on Sri Lanka in various areas, and pushing for international investigations into war crimes to undermine the efforts of the 'democratically' elected government."

Pro-LTTE groups are engaged in a futile campaign to seek the support of the "international community" for a separate capitalist state of Eelam in the North and East of Sri Lanka. All the major powers, including the US,

backed the war against the LTTE. They have rejected the formation of a separate Eelam and virtually dropped any demand for an international inquiry into the military's atrocities during the war.

Without providing any evidence, Rajapakse claimed that "there is a possibility ...terrorists will reorganise within this country." Pro-LTTE groups abroad, he said, were aiming to "encourage and facilitate the resumption of an armed struggle in Sri Lanka." There were detainees who could not be rehabilitated, including those whose "terrorist intentions may remain unchanged."

The purpose of this "terrorist threat" is to justify the maintenance of the country's huge military machine and police-state apparatus. The defence secretary declared that it was "of critical importance to maintain a strong [military] presence in areas... used by the LTTE for terrorist activities." He added: "[M]aintaining a sizeable army and establishing camps in strategic locations throughout Sri Lanka is essential."

Rajapakse then made clear that the government's real concern was not the re-emergence of an armed LTTE, but the rising levels of social discontent. He declared that the "more realistic potential threat to our national security is the possibility that certain groups may strive to create instability" in Sri Lanka through indirect methods.

The defence secretary continued: "[H]aving seen political change accomplished in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya through uprising, some parties ... might resort to such activities even here...we have already seen certain groups encouraging students to take to the streets in various protests in the recent past."

The reference to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt is significant. The revolutionary upheaval in Egypt in particular saw the involvement of broad layers of workers in opposition not only to the Cairo regime's anti-democratic methods but also to the austerity agenda being imposed.

In Sri Lanka, as in Egypt, there is a deep social chasm between rich and poor. The Rajapakse government is imposing the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for privatisation, deep inroads into public spending and the lowering of wages and conditions. These measures are provoking growing opposition among

workers, youth and rural poor.

The government is well aware that the trade unions are increasingly unable to contain workers. At the same time, the main opposition parties—the United National Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—are becoming as discredited as the government. That is why the government is preparing the state apparatus in advance to crush any protests.

The defence secretary declared that Sri Lanka was a "democratic nation" but lectured workers and youth not to exercise their democratic rights to defend their interests. In reality, Sri Lanka remains a police state. All the anti-democratic powers that were employed during the war—including arbitrary arrest and detention without trial—remain in force despite the formal ending of the country's state of emergency. Thousands of Tamil youth remain in custody without charge, two years after the end of the war.

The Socialist Equality Party warns that the Rajapakse regime will have no hesitation in using the security apparatus against the working class and youth. Just as the opposition parties supported the civil war, so they will fall in behind any crackdown on protests and strikes that threaten the capitalist order.

The working class must prepare for the coming struggles by building a revolutionary leadership directed at abolishing the capitalist system that is the root cause of war, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights and at establishing a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. Such a perspective is only possible by uniting the struggles of working people in Sri Lanka with those in the Middle East, Asia and internationally for a world planned socialist economy. That is the program for which the SEP fights.



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