

Sri Lankan prison guards shoot protesting inmates

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Sri Lankan prison guards shot and injured scores of protesting inmates in Colombo's Welikada Magazine Prison, the country's biggest incarceration facility, last Wednesday. The riot and its bloody suppression underscore the brutal conditions in the prisons and the anti-democratic nature of President Mahinda Rajapakse's government.

Twenty-six remand prisoners were admitted to the Colombo National Hospital. As many as 19 had suffered gunshot injuries below their knees. Five prison guards were also injured, hit by bricks or stones.

Prisons Minister Chandrasiri Gajadheera told the media that the riot was instigated by "outsiders" and that the rioters were "drug addicts." The police, the prison authorities and the media regurgitated the same propaganda, all for the purpose of justifying the repression carried out, and covering up the implications of inmates being shot with live bullets on the orders of higher authorities.

On Wednesday morning, hundreds of prisoners in the jail's Magazine section started protesting against a new ban on their relatives or friends bringing in food from outside. Guards immediately began to beat the inmates. When, provoked by the beatings, prisoners reacted by pelting guards with stones, the guards opened fire.

More prisoners then joined the riot, hurling stones and setting fire to a records room. Some climbed onto the prison roof. Inmates demanded the immediate removal of the prison superintendent, displaying banners with the slogan: "Don't shoot us! No to SP!" [the superintendent].

The government called in the police and an army unit to curb the riot. Police used tear gas extensively, and special police forces were deployed, to disperse the prisoners, who protested for about four hours.

Prison authorities told the media they had appointed a

new superintendent from another jail at Kalahari because of his "excellent service" in eradicating drugs inside that prison. The food ban provides an indication of the harsh regime that the new superintendant is imposing.

One hospitalised inmate told *Lakbima*: "This morning we found out that the authorities had banned bringing food from our homes. Some 2,000 prisoners held a protest against that. We have tried to meet the commissioner of prisons to discuss this injustice. But they did not allow us. Prison guards closed the gate and fired at us. Inmates that received gunshots fell one by one. I was also hit and fell onto the ground. They don't have any right to shoot us, even if we do protest. Do they have such a right?"

Another prisoner explained: "We eat only the food that is brought from our homes. Ninety percent of the prisoners here do that, because the food is not so good here. It is very unfair to ban food from home." He added: "I am a father of three children. If something happened to me, what would happen to my wife and children?"

All the prisoners in the Magazine section are on remand, awaiting trial. Some have languished there for several years. About 180 Tamils on remand in the facility did not participate in the protest and were transferred the next day to other sections of the prison.

Sri Lankan prisons are notorious for the inhuman treatment of inmates. In November, about 65 Tamils in Anuradhapura prison held a hunger strike, demanding protection after being assaulted by prison officials in a communal provocation. Tamils on remand in several prisons have frequently held protests against lengthy internment without charge and demanded better facilities.

In January last year, when prisoners protested against

poor quality food at Anuradhapura prison, guards shot and killed one person and injured about 20 others.

The use of force against inmates is not an isolated phenomenon. President Rajapakse's government has given the security forces and police a free hand to suppress political opponents, attack protesting workers and youth, and carry out extra-judicial killings. Such police-state measures were developed and honed during the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

According to the Asian Human Rights Commission, 12 people were killed in police custody during 2011. People who had not even been charged with any offence were taken out and shot at convenient locations, with the police claiming that they had tried to attack police or escape.

Because of the deteriorating social conditions of working people and the poor, the prison cells are filled with people who sought to earn a living through drug trafficking and minor theft. The conditions in which they are detained are appalling. United Nations officials have reported that the prisons fail to meet the UN's "Standard Minimum Rules for Treatment of Prisoners."

Christina Albetin, a representative of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, stated in a report last July that the institutional capacity of the country's prisons was 11,000 inmates, but the total prison population exceeded 30,933. Albetin added that more than 50 percent of the prisoners were on remand, and half were incarcerated for not paying fines.

Conditions for female prisoners were the worst. In Welikada prison, according to the UN study, 650 female inmates were living in a ward built for 150 persons. They were not allowed to use toilets until 5 a.m. each day and instead had to use buckets in their cells.

At the time of the UN report, the government, as with other human rights abuse cases, promised to review the situation. Wednesday's prison incident confirms that this pledge was bogus.

Showing the nervousness within a section of the political establishment that the prison riot was a symptom of rising social discontent, a *Daily Mirror* editorial warned the government that the incident, together with recent protests by workers and university students, indicated that Sri Lanka was atop a "volcano."

The brutal repression of the Welikada prison riot demonstrates the kind of methods that the government and the ruling elite are preparing for use against protests by workers and the poor, as resistance grows to the government's implementation of intensifying austerity measures to slash jobs, working conditions and living standards.



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