

Sri Lankan security forces kill dozens of prison inmates

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Sri Lankan elite security forces killed at least 27 inmates in Colombo's Welikada prison on Friday night after provoking a clash while conducting a search operation. According to the media, 59 people were injured, including 43 prisoners.

The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse is responsible for the deaths. Friday's attack inside the country's biggest jail underscores the government's growing reliance on police-state measures.

The assault was the deadliest in a Sri Lankan prison since the cold-blooded murder of 53 Tamil political prisoners in the same facility by Sinhala racist inmates, aided by prison authorities, during the 1983 Black July anti-Tamil pogrom.

A Special Task Force (STF) unit of police commandos was deployed to the prison on Friday afternoon, supposedly for a raid to uncover contraband items such as mobile phones and narcotics.

A prisoner interviewed by the BBC's Sinhala service, *Sandeshaya*, described how the commandos provoked a conflict with prisoners: "They began to hand-cuff and take prisoners out. When the prisoners opposed hand-cuffing, they beat them. They locked the prisoners back in cells and tear-gassed the cells. That is when others outside began to scream and pelt stones."

The commandos killed and wounded prisoners, then moved outside and tear-gassed the entire prison. Several police officers were also injured.

Another prisoner told the Indian daily, the *Hindu*: "There was resentment among remand prisoners

because they were stripped and beaten up."

At one stage, according to the police, prisoners seized firearms from the prison armoury. For several hours they were in control of the jail, with prisoners seen on roofs with one or two weapons in hand. The entire prison was surrounded by a heavy contingent of police, as well as army troops. At the front gate, the security forces killed five or six prisoners who reportedly attempted to escape in a three-wheeled taxi.

In the early hours of Saturday morning, a unit of elite army commandos entered the premises, equipped with three armoured vehicles, night vision equipment and sharpshooters, and took control.

In the morning, police said 11 dead bodies of prisoners were found. Media reports indicate that the bodies were sent directly to the police morgue, not to the National Hospital, possibly to avoid a judicial inquiry.

Reporting to parliament on Saturday, Rehabilitation and Prison Reforms Minister Chandrasiri Gajadheera, a member of Sri Lanka's Stalinist Communist Party, defended and whitewashed the crime. He blamed the prisoners, accusing them of violently resisting the search operation and attacking the security forces and civilians.

A senior Western Province police official Anura Senanayake, speaking to the media outside the prison on Saturday, alleged that hard-core criminals organised a riot and claimed that all attempts to negotiate with the prisoners had failed. However, he admitted that about 10 inmates had surrendered firearms as a result of

discussions with police.

These remarks by the minister and the police commander are an attempt to justify the massacre of prisoners. Neither explained how the fighting broke out between unarmed prisoners, hundreds of whom were still locked in their cells, and heavily-armed police commandos.

Speaking to the media, Suranga Bandara, an attorney representing several Welikada inmates, challenged the legality of the STF search operation. “Neither the police nor the army has the right to enter the prison premises in order to perform a search operation, without having a court order,” he said. “This is an illegal procedure.” Family members of prisoners had told Bandara that the STF executed some inmates.

Police said the Criminal Investigation Department had started a probe to find out whether there was “any unnecessary killings” by the STF. In addition, a magisterial inquiry was convened on Saturday evening and the prison department appointed a three-member committee to investigate the incident.

Given the experience of previous official probes into such incidents, these investigations will only cover up what occurred, and the responsibility of the relevant authorities, including the government itself.

Violence against prisoners is not new in Sri Lanka. In fact, it escalated sharply following the end of the protracted civil war, which resulted in the defeat of separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. Moreover, such measures are not possible without official approval at the highest levels.

In January this year, prison guards fired at inmates in the Welikada Magazine prison who were protesting against a ban on their relatives or friends bringing in food from outside. At least 19 prisoners were wounded. In June, an STF attack on Tamil inmates in the Vavuniya prison in northern Sri Lanka resulted in three deaths. The prisoners had been fasting in protest over the torture of a detainee.

The over-crowded conditions inside Sri Lankan

prisons are producing increasing unrest. Prisons minister Gajadheera has stated that Welikada prison, which has a capacity of about 1,500, houses 3,621 inmates. According to other reports, the actual number is between 4,000 and 5,000.

UN figures indicated that the total prison population was 30,933 in the middle of last year, but the prisons only had an overall capacity for 11,000 inmates. The *Sunday Leader* has reported that more than 500 death row prisoners are crammed, six to a cell, into cells designed for three.

The conditions prevailing inside the prisons are the result of cuts to government spending on prison maintenance, as well as the general deterioration in social conditions for the working people and poor, which has resulted in a rise of petty crimes.

Above all, Friday’s attack on prisoners is another warning to the working class of the repressive methods that the government is increasingly using to enforce its rule, and suppress any opposition to its implementation of the austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund.



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