

Sri Lanka: Jaffna University students arrested

Our correspondents
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Four Jaffna University student leaders were arrested by the police late last month, and handed over to the notorious Terrorism Investigation Division for interrogation. Those arrested in the northern Sri Lankan city included P. Dharshananth, the secretary of the Jaffna University Students Union, K. Jenemejayan, the arts faculty student union leader, and S. Solomon, the science faculty student union leader.

The pretext used for the arrests was a complaint made by a recently established pro-government paramilitary group, called the Sri Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (Sri TELO), that a petrol bomb had been thrown at its office, situated near the university, at around 3.30 a.m. on November 29.

TELO had been one of the original Tamil separatist groups founded in the late 1970s, but most of its members, including its leader Sri Sabaratnam, were killed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1985 during the fratricidal infighting. The remnants of the TELO have joined the capitalist Tamil National Alliance (TNA), while a new group, Sri TELO, has emerged to directly serve the interests of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

All four students being interrogated were named in the bogus complaint, without any evidence to implicate them in the alleged bomb-throwing incident. Residents around the Sri TELO office have said they heard no bomb explosion.

The arrests followed a series of police and military provocations against Jaffna University students. On November 27, armed police, intelligence and security officers were mobilised around the university. In the

evening, when a small number of students prepared to light a lamp to mark “Hero’s Day,” once traditionally proclaimed by the LTTE to commemorate those who had fallen in its war with the Colombo regime, the police attacked them.

Police then broke into the female students’ hostel and ransacked their rooms, broke open their cupboards and threw away their books and other materials. The helpless students were left screaming with fear.

The *Uthayan*, a Tamil daily published in Jaffna, reported that its editor, T. Premananth, and a Tamil parliamentarian, E. Saravanabavan, who visited the scene, were assaulted by military intelligence officers and had stones thrown at their vehicles. Premananth had to save his camera from two gangs, wearing black masks, who tried to snatch it. Saravanabavan told the BBC: “Army people in civilian dress took the editor T. Premananth by the neck of his shirt and punched [him], [while] holding him against the wall.”

Jaffna army commander, Mahinda Hathurusinghe, dismissed the story, saying the parliamentarian had been “paid to spread rumors against the military.” He claimed that the military only “acted to stop students throwing stones and bottles at us.”

The next day, the police and military attacked a group of about 400 unarmed university students when they attempted to march from the university’s main gate toward the science faculty, carrying placards against the previous day’s military-police assault. Hundreds of riot police and security forces blocked the march.

Photographs published by the BBC and Agence-

France Presse showed riot police attacking a student who had fallen while running. A photograph published by the BBC Tamil service showed police and army personnel cornering two students against a wall and threatening them with machine guns.

An injured student told the WSWS: “The police attacked us without any warnings. We don’t even have the right to express our opposition peacefully here. They used clubs, guns and whatever they found in their hands to attack us. In the hospital too, military intelligence threatened to abduct us.” Panicked by these threats, all the hospitalised students fled the ward.

Though the students declared a boycott of classes as a mark of protest, the armed security forces continued to occupy the roads leading to the campus. Army and police personnel guarded the entrances, junctions and roads, with military vehicles roaming the surrounding area.

These incidents underscore the oppressive military regime that rules in the Tamil-majority north, three and a half years after the LTTE’s defeat in 2009. The attacks also point to the government’s fear of the growing mass anger against its austerity measures, implemented under the orders of the International Monetary Fund. The suppression of student protest, in particular, is bound up with the government’s IMF-backed plan to privatise education.

An arts faculty student told the WSWS: “The people don’t have any political rights in Sri Lanka. When university students were subjected to attacks previously, several organisations such as the university administration and even military commanders gave promises. But there is no end to these attacks. While the government is mainly responsible for these attacks, we do not believe anyone else is there to defend us.”

The young man said most students had no confidence in any political party, including the TNA. He commented: “While the TNA is talking nationalism to hoodwink us, its aim is to sit in power alongside the government in Colombo.”

The TNA, which previously acted as the

parliamentary mouthpiece of the LTTE, is openly seeking an accommodation with the Colombo political establishment. As with the LTTE’s separatist perspective, the TNA’s political manoeuvring seeks to secure the interests of the Tamil capitalist class, not the working people. The LTTE’s military defeat was the direct product of the political bankruptcy of its perspective, which depended on seeking the support of India and the imperialist powers to establish a capitalist mini-state in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the only way to defend the democratic rights of the minority communities is through a unified struggle of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working people, leading all the oppressed layers of the population, for the establishment of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a socialist federation of South Asia.



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