

Sri Lankan Buddhist extremists attack Muslim-owned businesses

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A mob of Buddhist extremists led by monks, understood to belong to the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS or Buddhist Force Militia), ransacked two Muslim-owned businesses in Papiliyana, some 10 kilometres south of central Colombo, last Thursday. They first stormed an Emerald Trading construction equipment yard and then the warehouse and head office of the Fashion Bug clothing chain.

These were the most violent attacks so far by Sinhala-Buddhist extremists against the Muslim community. Previously, several groups including Ravana Force and Sinhala Ravaya incited provocateurs to picket Muslim businesses to physically block customers. The BBS had distanced itself from those incidents, while holding public rallies that poured out venomous anti-Muslim propaganda.

According to Emerald Trading's owner, Mursi Ahamad Sadoon, his business was attacked at around 8.10 p.m. "They stoned all the vehicles and equipment in the yard and set fire to the office," he said, adding that the damage would easily exceed 10 million rupees (\$US78,900).

The front glass of Fashion Bug's building and a truck parked in front of it were also damaged. The truck driver was seriously injured and several workers were manhandled as they left the premises. The mob also attacked journalists who have arrived to cover the incident. A Hiru TV journalist sustained severe injuries.

Although Sadoon called the police emergency number 119 immediately, no police arrived. As the mob got bigger, he was forced to flee to the nearest police station at Kohuwala, about one kilometre away, to plead for help. After much discussion, he was told to take a few police officers in his own vehicle to the site of the assault.

The pretext for the rampage was a love affair between

a young Muslim worker at Emerald Trading and a local 15-year-old Sinhala girl. The boy was arrested, the day before the mob attack, for allegedly raping the girl.

Sadoon told the media: "I am a Muslim. But I studied in a Sinhala school and I have many Sinhala friends. We are all Sri Lankan. I can't understand why these type of things happen."

Sadoon's Sinhala landlord, Nandana Perera condemned the attack and accused the occupants of Sunethradevi Pirivena, an adjacent Buddhist temple and monastery. Perera told WSWs: "I called chief incumbent priest and told him that this was like stoning the plate of alms that we have offered you."

The BBS, as usual, denied any involvement in the attack. According to eyewitnesses, however, the offenders met at the Sunethradevi Pirivena temple a few hours before the attack. The temple's chief monk, Madagoda Abetissa, is a leading member of the BBS and has played a prominent role in its public anti-Muslim campaign.

Colombo Telegraph video footage shows a Buddhist monk stoning a CCTV camera at the building while police officers stood by.

The BBS has intensified its communal campaign in recent weeks. At two public meetings in Panadura and Kandy, the BBS called on Sinhalese people to boycott the clothing business chains, Fashion Bug and No Limit, both owned by Muslim traders.

At the Kandy meeting, held on March 17, BBS general secretary Galabodaaththe Gnanasara, a Buddhist monk, accused No Limit and Fashion Bug of "exploiting Sinhalese youths and sexually abusing Sinhalese girls."

Based among desperate layers of the Sinhala middle class, including traders who aim to take over the Muslim businesses, the BBS has brazenly declared

itself to be an unofficial police force and would do anything to defend the “Sinhala-Buddhist heritage”.

The BBS has tacit government backing. Earlier this year President Mahinda Rajapakse met BBS leaders at his residence and sanctioned their pledge to defend Buddhism. His brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, then participated at the opening ceremony for a BBS leadership training centre.

The Papiliyana attack went on for more than two hours without any attempt by police to stop it, even after their delayed arrival. According to media reports, it was only after some Muslim politicians pressed the president to intervene, that the attackers were finally dispersed using the police Special Task Force and the army.

The police arrested no one on the spot. This response is in stark contrast to the use of water cannons, tear gas, baton charges and live bullets against protests by workers, youth and the poor. In May 2011, police opened fire on Free Trade Zone workers at Katunayake, killing one person during a demonstration against the government’s pension bill. In February last year, the police killed one fisherman and severely injured several others during protests in Chilaw against the government’s fuel price hikes.

The Rajapakse government is fostering the BBS and other chauvinist Buddhist organisations in an attempt to divide the working class and oppressed people along communal lines as popular opposition mounts to the government’s IMF-dictated austerity measures.

The government’s fomenting of communalism has come under criticism in some sections of the ruling elite, concerned that it could trigger wider political and social unrest. In a March 31 editorial, the *Island*, a strong backer of Rajapakse, declared that “anti-Muslim protests have spun out of control and the country is headed for disaster.”

For now, the Rajapakse regime has sought to head off criticism by authorising the belated arrest of three Buddhist monks, and 14 others, over last week’s rampages. But the long record of the Sinhala ruling class demonstrates its repeated recourse to communalism whenever it has felt threatened by opposition in the working class.

The development of the BBS and other similar organisations is a sharp warning to the working class of the vicious methods that will be used in order to impose

the burden of the global economic turmoil. Workers and young people must oppose all forms of communalism and fight for the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.



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