

Sri Lanka: Pro-government thugs set fire to Tamil newspaper office

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15 April 2013

A group of armed thugs set fire to the Jaffna office of *Uthayan*, a Tamil-language daily, in military-occupied northern Sri Lanka on Saturday morning. This is the second attack on the newspaper during the past fortnight, part of a wave of violence against the Rajapakse government's political opponents and media critics.

Three men arrived on motorbikes, wielding AK-47 rifles and pistols, and entered the *Uthayan* office at about 4.45 a.m. They went directly to the printing section, threatened the security guard and the press staff, doused the area with petrol and set fire to the printing machine, valued at 20 million rupees (\$US160,000).

Editor T. Premananth told the media: "We will not be able to print the newspaper in full strength from now, as our main printing machine is damaged beyond repair. The attackers also burnt the printed supplementary materials for the Sunday issue, before fleeing the scene."

According to *Uthayan online*, the police officer who was guarding the office took no action. Nor was there any response to phone calls to the Jaffna police station and the emergency number 119. The police only arrived belatedly, after the newspaper's Colombo office intervened.

Uthayan is owned by E. Saravanabavan, a parliamentarian for the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of Tamil bourgeois parties. Saravanabavan blamed the government, saying that as the northern provincial election was to be held in September, "the existence of the newspaper is adverse to its [the government's] interests."

As in the past, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government and the military have denied any involvement in the crime. Media Centre for National

Security director general Lakshman Hulugalle even accused the newspaper of organising the attack itself. "There is nothing new in this attack," he said. "This is the same tactic used by the LTTE [the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]."

Without any substantiation, Hulugalle declared: "Initial investigations have revealed that it is an inside job to tarnish the image of the government and the country." He made the statement before any inquiry commenced.

The attack, however, follows a definite pattern. Pro-government thugs, operating with the complicity of security forces, are able to strike in high-security areas and escape with ease. Four years after the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, Jaffna and the entire Northern Province is under heavy military occupation.

The *Uthayan* office is situated at the centre of Jaffna town. It is impossible for anyone carrying firearms to move in the area without the military's knowledge. But the paramilitary groups such as the Eelam People Democratic Party can roam with impunity throughout the northern province.

Less than two weeks ago, on April 3, the *Uthayan* distribution office at Kilinochchi in the northern Vanni region was ransacked and its staff severely beaten with clubs. The police announced an investigation, but, as in similar cases, no arrests have been made, nor are they likely to be made.

On January 15, one *Uthayan* journalist was attacked at the Jaffna bus stand and another threatened with death by a person in military uniform.

Uthayan has been attacked 15 times since 2006, the year that President Rajapakse renewed the protracted communal war against the LTTE. On May 1, 2006, just a day before World Press Freedom Day celebrations in Colombo, gunmen stormed the newspaper's office,

killed two staff and injured several others.

Yesterday, Brigadier Ruwan Wanigasooriya claimed that other publications in Jaffna and elsewhere had levelled harsh criticism of the government and military but made no allegations of harassment. “Why is it only *Uthayan* ?” he asked, again implying that the newspaper had destroyed its own press.

Other sections of the media have also come under serious attack, however. This intimidation and violence is associated with the continued strengthening, since the end of the war, of the police-state apparatus that is aimed primarily against the working class.

On February 7, unidentified thugs grabbed bundles of *Thinakkural*, a Tamil-language newspaper in Jaffna and set them on fire. On February 15, Faraz Shauketaly, a journalist working for the *Sunday Leader*, was shot at his residence at Mount Lavinia, near Colombo.

On the March 8, Udayarasa Salin, a journalist for another Jaffna-based newspaper *Valampuri*, was attacked by a mob. Sri Lanka is currently placed at 162 out of 179 countries on the Press Freedom Index.

While not yet announced officially, Rajapakse has declared that elections for the provincial council in the Northern Province will be held in September. The government is determined to win the election or at least gain a sizeable number of seats. The attack on *Uthayan* is a sign of the methods that will be used against its opponents.

The government wants a strong vote in the election so as to claim support among Tamils and deflect international criticism over its war crimes. The US and its allies are exploiting the issue, not to support democratic rights in Sri Lanka, but to pressure Rajapakse and increase their influence on Colombo.

The TNA is the government’s main rival capitalist party in the north. It has also been using human rights violations to press the government for a power-sharing arrangement, involving a devolution of powers at the provincial level, in order to secure privileges for the Tamil bourgeoisie.

Though the TNA secured the highest proportion of votes in the north at the 2010 national election and subsequent local government elections, the majority of people abstained from voting. This party is widely discredited among ordinary Tamils because of its sordid manoeuvring with Colombo governments.

The TNA has begun campaigning in a bid to boost its

electoral prospects. On April 3, a group of thugs attacked a TNA meeting held in Kilinochchi. TNA activists seized a police intelligence officer who was among the thugs and handed him over to the police, who simply released him.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, is on record as saying that the government does not want a TNA administration in the northern province. In an interview with the *Island* on March 29, he declared: “Could we afford to have a provincial administration here, which pointed a gun at the national leadership at the drop of a hat? We don’t want to be at the mercy of scheming provincial administrations.”

The threat is clear, and not limited to the north. The government will not tolerate any opposition. As the political and economic crisis deepens, raising the prospect of a social explosion, the Rajapakse government is using the police-state apparatus built up during the war to attack every basic democratic right.

Workers and young people can put no faith in any of the opposition parties to defend democratic rights. All the major capitalist parties have a long record of violence against their opponents. The struggle for democratic rights is intimately bound up with the political fight for socialism.

Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers must unite, rally the rural poor and fight for a socialist republic of Eelam and Sri Lanka, as part of a socialist revolution in South Asia and internationally. That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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