

Sri Lankan mass grave recalls rural massacres

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Evidence is mounting that a mass grave found recently in Sri Lanka, containing hundreds of dead bodies, could be a burial site for some of the tens of thousands of rural youth massacred under the United National Party (UNP) government of President R. Premadasa between 1988 and 1990.

The site was accidentally found during an excavation for the construction of a hospital in Matale, about 150 kilometres from Colombo. The police and the government sought to cover-up the revelation, which initially emerged in November. As public concern grew, however, a Matale magistrate, Chathurika de Silva, ordered the police to produce the remains for scientific scrutiny.

Last month, the magistrate concluded that the skeletons could date back to the 1988-90 period. She based her decision on a report by Ajith Jayasena, the judicial medical officer (JMO) of Matale hospital and Raj Somadeva, professor of the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology, Kelaniya University, who examined the remains.

Altogether, 154 skeletons and material were examined using forensic and archaeological techniques, which indicated that the deaths were caused by blunt instruments, as well as gunshots and decapitation. Somadeva told the media: “There should be someone who is responsible for this mass grave.”

He added that bodies were buried “not in manner that is characteristic of any Sri Lankan community. Some were found by themselves. There were other bodies stacked in groups of six and four. Only the skulls of some of the deceased could be found—only partial skeletons in some other cases.”

Speaking to Al Jazeera, Dr. Jayasena said that “evidence of decapitation, dismemberment and concealment” indicated that “crimes were committed.”

During the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), President J.R. Jayawardene signed the July 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord with New Delhi to bring Indian troops to disarm the LTTE in the north and east, and grant limited concessions to the Tamil capitalist elite. Jayawardene sent the Sri Lankan military into southern provinces to crush a Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led anti-Indian chauvinist campaign and unrest among rural youth over unemployment and poverty.

An estimated 60,000 youth were killed or disappeared during this period, along with JVP activists, including its leader Rohana Wijeweera. The government justified the massacre of youth in the south by citing fascistic attacks by the JVP. The military coordinated the repression, organising death squads. Jayawardene and his successor, Premadasa, tightened emergency laws, permitting the death squads to act with impunity. Matale was one area where mass murders were perpetrated.

Once it became public that the current defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, President Mahinda Rajapakse’s brother, acted as the military coordinating officer for the Matale district during this period, the government and the state media launched a disinformation campaign.

Ignoring the magistrate’s report, defence ministry spokesman Lakshman Hulugalle said the police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) had not concluded its investigation. The CID is notorious for concocting evidence. He said the skeletons could be victims of a 1947 smallpox epidemic or a 1971 JVP-led revolt.

President Rajapakse said he would appoint a commission to investigate the grave. This is another well-worn method for suppressing the truth. Facing

accusations over the military's killing of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians during the final days of war against the LTTE in 2009, Rajapakse appointed a Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission to whitewash the crimes.

Last week, K.G. Kamalawathie, from Ukuwela village in Matale, told the WSWs how her two sons, aged 17 and 18, were abducted by the army in 1989 and then disappeared. "On December 13, 1989 Gajaba regiment army officers came in uniform and took my two sons out in a truck at about 1.30 p.m."

Her sons had been studying at the Matale Vijaya College and Science College. Another young worker was seized with them. Kamalawathie said 13 youth from her neighbourhood had been abducted during this period. "They were taken to the army camp set up at Vijaya College," she said. "I was not allowed to see my children, however much I tried. Three days later they showed a list of names. The names of my two sons were there. But they were cut with a red pen."

Kamalawathie went to see opposition parliamentarians, some of whom are now ministers, seeking their help. She got only false promises from Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leaders, including Mahinda Rajapakse. "Even as he [Mahinda Rajapakse] was uttering these lies it was under the orders of his own brother that the children were massacred."

SLFP leaders, backed by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and the fake left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), launched various protests to exploit the mass opposition to the massacres for electoral gains. SLFP leader Chandrika Kumaratunga, elected president in 1994, appointed presidential commissions to defuse the outrage. The reports of these commissions were just shelved.

The JVP, which was thoroughly discredited among ordinary people for its fascistic attacks, and a breakaway faction, the Front Line Socialist Party, are now seizing on the massacres committed during this period to try to justify its chauvinist campaigns as an heroic uprising. The JVP killed political opponents and workers for not supporting its campaigns. Among them were three members of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

The RCL carried out an international campaign

against the UNP government's repression and the JVP's fascistic attacks in 1988-90. When the RCL called for a united front of working class organisations against the government and the JVP, the LSSP, CP and NSSP opposed mobilising the working class. Instead they backed a coalition with the SLFP, thereby spreading illusions among workers and peasants in the Peoples Alliance led by the SLFP.

The RCL also strongly condemned the killing of JVP leaders and members, while explaining that the JVP was politically responsible for the bloody repression of young people by providing the pretext for strengthening the hand of the state and for backing the communal anti-Tamil war. Behind the scenes, the JVP had secret talks with Premadasa, seeking positions in the government, and was permitted to re-enter the political establishment in 1994. The JVP backed Kumaratunga's election in 1994 and Mahinda Rajapakse's in 2005.

A statement issued by the RCL on February 8, 1990 called on the working class to come to the defence of rural youth. It stated: "It is decisively important that the working class takes the initiative and rise up to defend the rural masses against the attacks that are being carried out by the state forces and groups of thugs."

Matale's mass grave highlights the ruthless record of every faction of the ruling elite. The Rajapakse government is today utilising the police-state methods developed during the past 30 years for use against mounting popular opposition to its deepening austerity measures and attacks on the basic rights of workers, youth and the rural poor.



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