Sri Lankan government evicts poor families in Dambulla

Vilani Peiris
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The Urban Development Authority (UDA) has begun evicting poor families around the Dambulla Buddhist temple in Central Province. The UDA claims the area belongs to the "sacred city" of the Rangiri Dambulu Temple. In reality, the evictions in Dambulla city are part of the Sri Lankan government's plans to promote the country to investors, in line with the requirements of the International Monetary Fund.

On June 19, the UDA demolished the houses of 22 families who agreed to vacate, accepting 100,000 rupees ($US780) to find new places to live. The UDA has ordered another 44 families to leave by June 27. While some have agreed to vacate in return for the meagre compensation, others are struggling to defend their homes.

Last week, the UDA told residents of another 20 small houses, built in an abandoned paddy field, that they were inside the "sacred area". Families living in another area close to the temple, at Padeniya and Nissanka junction, are also facing eviction. These moves indicate that the government is preparing to displace hundreds of families.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's government has been carrying out mass evictions in towns around the country, as part of its drive to encourage investment and tourism. Evictions began in the capital Colombo, targeting 70,000 families. In order to suppress residents' opposition, Rajapakse placed the UDA and the Land Reclamation and Development Board—two civilian bodies—under the authority of his brother, defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and thus the military.

Those who face evictions in Dambulla include small vendors, city cleaners and day labourers. A resident told the WSWS that the government was planning to build tourist hotels in the area.

The government has deployed plainclothes police officers from the criminal investigation division (CID) to spy on people and monitor their movements. Police are also protecting the UDA employees brought in to demolish houses.

Faced with this intimidation, some families have packed their belongings, but cannot find alternative accommodation. One woman told the WSWS: "I went with my mother all over the area looking for a place to live. But we couldn't find one. Even if we find a room, the rent is not affordable."

An old woman explained that she had no alternative and took the compensation offered by the UDA. She added: "They warned me that if I didn't agree, I would get nothing. There are 17 in my family, as my children's families live with me. We are now on the road."

So-called sacred cities in the island's ancient Buddhist centres were first declared in Dambulla, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy by the United National Party (UNP) government of Prime Minister R. Premadasa in 1982. The decision was one of a series of communal provocations against Tamils and other minorities prior to the start of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983.

Clearing poor families from the Dambulla temple area is part of a "mega project"—the Greater Dambulla Development Plan, which covers 1,063 square kilometres. The area has been earmarked as a "commercial hub" for investors. Poor families will be evacuated without any plan to provide alternative homes, as the current evictions demonstrate.

This project began in 2009 and is due for completion in 2020, according to the UDA. Not only will the poor families around the Buddhist temple be affected, but

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others throughout the entire area.

As a means of dividing any resistance, the Buddhist prelates in Dambulla are carrying out ethnic and religious provocations. In April 2012, the chief priest of Rangiri Dambulu temple, Inamaluwe Sri Sumangala, launched an anti-Muslim campaign, demanding the demolition of the Masjidul Khaira mosque in a so-called sacred area.

Despite attempts by the government and chauvinist groups to whip up communal divisions, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim residents have united to fight the eviction plans. On May 19, more than 300 people participated in a picket that cut across ethnic and religious lines.

A young Tamil worker told the WSWS that "it's even more difficult for Tamils to find new houses for rent as the temple has started spreading Sinhala Buddhist communalism." He said the government was backing the racist campaign.

A Sinhala youth said: "We are scared to make our names known. White vans could abduct people here. The CID has rounded on us. We are opposed to the removal of the Muslim mosque. Everyone has the right to believe in their religion. We also oppose the eviction of Tamil people from the area."

Another resident told the WSWS that the major opposition parties, the UNP and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), had not opposed the evictions. "We supported Rajapakse in the elections but the government is against us," he said. "Now we have no sympathy for any of these political parties."

The opposition parties have similar economic programs to the government and also back Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) teams distributed a leaflet entitled "Defend Dambulla residents' housing rights." CID officers twice confiscated leaflets in an attempt to intimidate residents, but people continued to hold discussions with SEP supporters.

SEP supporters explained the economic crisis that lay behind the government's attacks on residents, and on the wages, conditions, public services and basic rights of the working class as a whole. Without challenging the profit system with an alternative socialist program, working people could not solve their problems.

This was an international struggle, the SEP supporters explained, with governments around the world, including in the advanced industrialised countries, mounting an assault on every previous social gain of the working class, including public education, housing and health services.

Dambulla residents cannot put their faith in any of the ruling class parties but must build independent action committees and appeal to the working class as a whole for support on the basis of a socialist perspective. Without overthrowing the capitalist system, controlled by the wealthiest few, and establishing a workers' and peasants' government, working people cannot defend even their most basic rights, such as housing.

The SEP appeals to workers, students and youth everywhere to defend those facing evictions. It urges workers to pass resolutions in their workplaces opposing the government's actions and upholding the right of the Dambulla residents to decent, affordable housing.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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