

Sri Lankan defence secretary expresses fears of social unrest

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Sri Lankan defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse recently justified the continued involvement of the military in the country's internal affairs by pointing to various "threats" facing the government, including mass social unrest and "terrorism".

Rajapakse, who is President Mahinda Rajapakse's brother, made his remarks in a June 13 lecture entitled "Sri Lanka's National Security Concerns," delivered to military officers studying at the Kotelawala Defence University.

Despite his warnings, the defence secretary repeatedly claimed that Sri Lanka was "one of the most peaceful and stable countries in the world" after the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. In the north and east, he said, "democracy has been completely restored," and restrictions on the movement of people and high security zones removed. Economic growth was "truly remarkable".

These statements are outright lies. The military occupation of the north and east is continuing and high security zones remain in place. People are subject to constant surveillance and harassment by security forces and associated paramilitary groups. Four years after the end of the civil war, discontent has intensified among workers, poor and youth throughout the country as a result of the government's attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

Rajapakse's list of threats included the "re-emergence" of the LTTE via groups such as the Transitional Government of Tamil Eelam and the British Tamil Forum abroad. He alleged that these groups were pushing for "international investigations into war crimes and claims of genocide" and "for the resumption of conflict through reorganising local pro-LTTE elements."

The defence minister's reference to a renewed "terrorist" threat is aimed at whipping up anti-Tamil communalism to divide the emerging struggles of the working class. Communal politics has been the stock-in-trade of Colombo governments ever since the country's formal independence in 1948. Repeated anti-Tamil pogroms and entrenched official discrimination led to the eruption of the conflict in 1983.

Organisations such as the Transitional Government of Tamil Eelam and the British Tamil Forum are seeking to exploit the government's continued attacks on democratic rights, as well as the widespread poverty and unemployment among Tamils. But their main political orientation is to the major imperialist powers, like the US and Britain, which are using the issue of human rights to pressure the Colombo government.

All the major global and regional powers backed the renewed communal war against the LTTE, supplied military assistance and remained silent about the Sri Lankan military's atrocities against civilians. The US and its allies only began to raise very limited concerns about the slaughter of civilians in the final months of the war, not out of concern for Tamils, but as a means for forcing the government to distance itself from China.

The defence secretary also claimed, without providing a shred of evidence, that the "emergence of extremist Islamic groups" posed a threat. He declared that these groups "have even tried to link up with the global Islamic terrorist movement."

Rajapakse's comments tie in with the reactionary anti-Muslim campaign being waged by Sinhala extremist organisations such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS or Buddhist Power Force) and Sihala Ravaya (Echo of Sinhalese). These groups have mounted protests and attacked Islamic religious places and business premises, and also

targeted Christian religious groups. Earlier this year, the defence secretary was a featured guest at the opening ceremony of a BBS leadership training centre.

The government's real concern, however, is the threat of widespread social unrest and an uprising by workers, youth and poor. "Although the likelihood of events such as the Arab Spring transpiring in Sri Lanka is minimal," due to "extremely popular political leadership", Rajapakse said, "this is yet another threat that needs to be monitored."

The defence secretary is well aware of the discontent toward the government, which has implemented the International Monetary Fund's austerity demands for cutbacks to subsidies and essential social services. Already, protests have taken place against the "extremely popular political leadership" over soaring prices, including for basic food items.

Rajapakse expressed particular concern over the use of Facebook, Twitter and other social media, which have played a prominent role among young people in the mass protests in other countries. He said "Internet penetration" and computer literacy could be used for "propagating certain ideologies online and mobilising and organising people," bypassing "the traditional tools of national defence".

The defence secretary claimed there was "a potential threat from other extremist groups ... involved in previous insurgencies." He said: "Their activities include radicalising students and encouraging them to take to the streets in various protests."

Rajapakse was referring to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its breakaway faction, the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). The JVP, which engaged in a failed armed uprising in 1971 and mounted a chauvinist campaign in the late 1980s against the Indo-Lanka Accord, is now part of the Colombo political establishment.

The government's real concern is not so much the JVP and FSP, but that young people, who are disenchanted with the entire political establishment, will begin to turn to revolutionary socialist politics. The central thrust of the defence secretary's lecture was to foment communal divisions while preparing the security forces to suppress any anti-government opposition.

Despite the end of the civil war, the Sri Lankan military remains one of the largest per capita in the

world and is being further strengthened. Rajapakse said that between 2005 and the end of 2009, the army grew from 120,000 to 200,000. Nine divisions were increased to 20 and the number of brigades expanded from 44 to 71. The navy, air force, police, including paramilitary police special task force units, and civil defence force have all been increased.

The defence budget has continued to climb. The government has brought all intelligence services under the control of the chief of national intelligence, who reports directly to the defence secretary. To further boost surveillance, the registrar of persons department, previously a civilian body, has been placed directly under the ministry of defence. Electronic identity cards will be introduced to replace existing ones.

Rajapakse's lecture gives a glimpse into the strengthening of the police-state apparatus, which was built up during the civil war, for use against the working class, young people and the rural poor.



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