

Sri Lankan army fires on protesters, killing 17-year-old youth

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Heavily-armed Sri Lankan army commandos opened fire on 5,000 protestors on Thursday in Gampaha, 15 kilometres from Colombo, killing 17-year-old Akila Dinesh and wounding several others.

Dinesh died from gun shots to his abdomen. Another wounded youth has been transferred to the Colombo National Hospital in a serious condition. More than 20 people, including journalists, are being treated at two hospitals in the area, some for bullet wounds.

The demonstrators—unarmed men, women and children from several villages including Galloluwa, Nadungama, Rathupaswela, Uruwela, Katuruwatta, Kirikiththa and Ambaraluwa—were protesting against the contamination of local drinking water by Vinogros Dip Products, a rubber-glove manufacturing plant. Villagers had been rallying for several days before the army attack, refusing to halt their protests without an immediate resolution to the problem.

On Thursday, the demonstrators gathered at the main junctions on the Colombo-Kandy highway at Weliveriya, Belummahara and Rathupaswela, blocking the road and rejecting police orders to disperse. They carried placards with slogans such as: “We don’t want acid water. Peace will come, if clean water is given to us.”

The vicious attack, which follows last year’s murderous assault on protesting Sri Lankan fisherman, is another example of the Rajapakse government’s increasing use of the military to crush any resistance by workers and peasants. According to media reports, a government security council meeting that involved defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse ordered the military mobilisation against the Gampaha protests.

About 1,000 soldiers wearing flak jackets and armed with T-56 assault rifles were deployed to the area. Members of the army’s motorcycle brigade arrived in

Belummahara at about 2 p.m. and immediately began harassing demonstrators, demanding they disperse.

About two hours later another group of soldiers were mobilised to Weliveriya to break up the demonstration. While the protestors eventually agreed to a directive from an army brigadier to disperse within five minutes, in the ensuing commotion, commandoes suddenly started firing live rounds. Protestors were also attacked with long batons, tear gas and water cannon.

The assault continued into the night, with the town’s electricity and communications cut by the military. Soldiers raided homes and other buildings. People fled in all directions seeking protection, including inside a nearby church, but the army entered the church and opened fire. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters saw patches of blood and bullet marks on the floor and walls of the church.

Weliveriya was like an army occupation zone yesterday, with shops closed. Armoured cars, soldiers and police officers were patrolling the area. Sandals and other footwear left by people fleeing Thursday’s attack were scattered along the road, together with broken barriers that demonstrators had erected in an effort to protect themselves. WSWs reporters saw several bullets on the ground, and people with bruised bodies and blood-soaked clothing.

While an uneasy calm prevails, there is seething anger against the government and the military. One woman showed the WSWs the damage to her house. She was at home with her two children on Thursday when about 15 people rushed inside, looking for protection. She hid her children under the bed before the army stormed inside, breaking doors and damaging furniture and bathroom fittings.

One child told us: “We were asked to love war heroes at the school. In fact, we loved them. We held *bodhi*

puja (a Buddhist ceremony) for soldiers. Now our love has vanished. We were attacked without any reason. We hate them.”

The child’s mother said: “If this is the way the army treats us, we can imagine how they would have treated Tamils [during the country’s civil war]. They said it was a ‘humanitarian operation’ but now we understand how the operation would have been carried out. We thought the army was to protect us. For them [the government], the rubber glove factory was the big thing—not its impact on thousands of us.”

Another resident told the WSWs: “The government is responsible for this attack—President Mahinda Rajapakse, Basil Rajapakse [the president’s brother and Sri Lanka’s economic development minister]. Basil [Rajapakse] is from this area. We will not vote for him in future.”

“The media, the police, the army and the courts are against us,” another said. “The media has not reported our true story.” He asked why a court magistrate had postponed an inquiry into the toxic poisoning of local drinking water until August 12. This was an urgent issue, he explained, and one of the reasons why the demonstrators had been so angry.

A 60-year-old said: “They [the soldiers] put a baton to my chest and said: ‘We are from the Sri Lankan army. Can you people challenge us?’”

An angry youth explained that about 40 young men were taken from the church, ordered to lie down, and then beaten. “They blamed us for blocking the road but they have closed it down since yesterday.”

A former Vinogros Dip Products worker said that the factory did not have a proper system to treat the chemically-mixed water it released. He claimed that up to 15,000 gallons of waste water was being released every day onto open ground, which could mix with ground water and then seep into wells. The factory is owned by Hayleys, one of Sri Lanka’s major industrial groups, and controlled by a local billionaire who is very close to the ruling Rajapakse cabal.

A Nadungamuwa resident explained that local water could not be used for drinking and was so polluted that even bathing was difficult. He said some people had suffered from rashes and other complaints after bathing in the water. Several local paddy fields were barren and residents suspect that many deaths may have been caused by polluted water.

Army spokesman Ruwan Wanigasuriya falsely claimed that protestors on Thursday had petrol bombs and bottles and declared that the military had used “minimal force”.

The brutal repression of protestors underscores the government’s nervousness over developing opposition among workers, poor and youth. Over the past weeks there have been strikes by railway and other workers, as well as protests by university students and demonstrations by the rural poor against government cuts to fertiliser subsidies. Battered by economic and political crisis, the Rajapakse government is using military methods and turning to police-state forms of rule to crush unrest.



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