

Sri Lankan Buddhist extremists attack Muslim mosque

W.A. Sunil
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Sinhala extremists led by several Buddhist monks attacked a mosque at Grandpass in Colombo on Saturday during the evening prayers at about 6.30 pm. According to local residents, more than 150 people came armed with wooden poles, stones and glass bottles. The mob has also attacked several homes belonging to Muslim people. At least 12 people were injured, three of whom remain in hospital, one in a critical condition.

No one identified the organisation that led the assault. There are several Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups led by Buddhist monks—Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist power force), Sinhala Ravaya (Sinhala Echo) and Ravana Balakaya (Ravana Force)—whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment. About a week ago, Sinhala Ravaya monks went to the area and told Islamic clerics to close down the mosque.

The mosque was completed about two months ago, after the government ordered the demolition of an old one nearby under its city development plan. Buddhist extremists opposed the new mosque and warned it should be removed by August 10.

Sections of the media are trying to paint the attack as a result of hostility between Sinhala residents and the Tamil-speaking minority. That is completely false. Grandpass is a predominantly working class area in Colombo where Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people live and there is no history of communal violence.

Several residents who spoke with WSWs reporters exposed the media lies. “All of us, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people alike, live here without any problem,” one said. “We support each other in our religious and social events.”

The assault was obviously planned. According to Muslim residents, the bell of the adjacent Buddhist temple was rung to gather attackers. They blocked the

mosque gate and entered. At the time, there were some 90 worshippers inside, who were sent to the upper floor by the clerics for their own protection. The mob tried to set fire to the building but were forced to retreat as worshippers began to resist and hundreds of Muslim people rushed to the mosque.

Residents said the police just watched the violence, without preventing it. The Sri Lanka Muslim Council condemned the attack as “a blatant violation of the fundamental rights of Muslims” in Sri Lanka and accused the police of “failing to intervene,” despite the presence of senior officers.

The government deployed riot police and an elite special police task force only after Muslim youth began retaliating. The police imposed 13-hour curfews on Saturday and Sunday nights. On Sunday, President Mahinda Rajapakse instructed several of his ministers to hold discussions with Muslim government ministers, and Muslim and Buddhist clerics, in a bid to quell anger among Muslims.

After the discussion, Technology Minister Champika Ranawaka, the general secretary of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which has been in the forefront of provocative campaign against Muslims—told the media that the issue was solved “through a just solution acceptable to all sides.” Under the “solution,” the Muslim clerics have to relocate the mosque to the old location that had been earmarked for demolition.

Muslim ministers in the ruling coalition issued a statement condemning the attack and mildly criticising the government for not preventing earlier attacks. These ministers, including Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Rauf Hakeem, are anxious to maintain their privileged posts. They plan to ask the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to press the government to halt the anti-Muslim campaign.

The latest attack is not an isolated incident. Muslim Council president N. M. Ameen told the media that more than 20 mosques had been attacked since last year. These occurred at Anuradhapura and Dambulla in North-Central province, Balangoda in Ratnapura District, Mahiyangana in Badulla District, and several other places. In March, two Muslim-owned businesses at Papiliyana in Colombo were attacked.

The extremist Sinhala-Buddhist organisations continue their anti-Muslim campaign with impunity, thanks to the patronage of Rajapakse's United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government and the support of the JHU. Bodu Bala Sena has built a multi-storey building in Colombo with the government's aid. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, has a particularly close relationship with Bodu Bala Sena.

In June, Sinhala Ravaya organised a 250-kilometre march from Kataragama to Colombo, seeking to inflame anti-Muslim sentiment. Among its demands were a halt to the killing of cattle and outlawing religious conversion. On the way, the marchers set fire to a beef stall at Tangalla, a criminal offence. Police just watched the blaze. At the end of the march, leading Buddhist monks were entertained by President Rajapakse, who promised to implement their demands within two months.

The Rajapakse government has turned to such anti-Muslim campaigns, along with continuing anti-Tamil propaganda, in order to divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines. The government, already facing growing opposition to its austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), is preparing more attacks on jobs, wages and social programs such as health and education.

The government's economic measures and violations of basic democratic rights have provoked a spate of protests by government workers, rural peasants and students in recent months. A recent demonstration by thousands of people at Weliveriya, in Gampaha district, against industrial water pollution pointed to the growing social unrest. On August 1, Rajapakse's government deployed the military to suppress the protest, killing three youth.

A clear pattern has emerged. The government is whipping up communalism with the help of Sinhala Buddhist extremist groups, while using military and

police-state methods to suppress workers, youth and the poor.



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