

Sri Lankan government bans protests over clean water

Rohantha De Silva**17 October 2013**

Sri Lankan police obtained a court order last Sunday banning demonstrations, processions and public gatherings of more than five people in Weliweriya and Malwathu-Hiripitiya, north of Colombo. This blatant attack on democratic rights represents a bid by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse to prevent protests by local people demanding the removal of a glove-making factory that is suspected of contaminating water in the area.

The immediate reason for the court order was to stop a vehicle procession organised last Sunday against the planned re-opening of the Venigros Dipped Products facility in Weliweriya. The plant has remained closed since early August due to strong opposition by residents, who say its emissions pollute the ground water, affecting their health and their crops.

On August 1st, the government deployed an army contingent that attacked about 5,000 protesters, killing three youth and injuring about 30 people. Despite this violent repression, the government has failed to contain local opposition.

Sunday's protest was called by the Siyane Water Protection Organisation against a government-backed deal struck on October 10 between the Dipped Products management and a Buddhist monk, Theripehe Siridhamma, who led some of the earlier agitations against the factory. The agreement was to allow the plant to operate for six months until it was relocated to another area, and to provide villagers with piped water.

Local residents regarded the deal as a ruse to re-open the factory. As anger mounted, Siridhamma fled the area. At a press conference in the remote town of Gampola last week, the monk insisted that he was not a "traitor" and would keep silent for the time being.

The government's backing for the agreement was not a genuine effort to resolve the lack of a clean water

supply, but was aimed at defusing protests for six months. The government wanted to pacify residents in the lead-up to planned western provincial council elections early next year.

Assistant Police Superintendent Chandana Kodithuwakku told the protesters gathered on Sunday that the court wanted to implement the agreement. He threatened to arrest any protester and broke up the crowd. He also dispersed hundreds of people gathered outside the factory to prevent it operating. The previous night, unidentified people visited the area and warned villagers not to attend the protest.

In a related incident, police arrested residents who protested in front of a local temple, called the Sabhawa Temple, after seeing an exorcism being performed. The residents thought the ritual, involving factory officials, was seeking to protect the plant. Police arrested 17 people, including women, who were later bailed out after receiving police warnings.

The government has made it clear it will stop at nothing to protect the factory and suppress local opposition. Dipped Products is run by Hayleys, one of the country's biggest companies. Its chief owner, Dammika Perera, is the wealthiest billionaire in Sri Lanka and personally close to President Rajapakse.

The Weliweriya facility is a major glove manufacturing plant. Dipped Products exports 5 percent of the world's non-medical gloves, and the Weliweriya factory constituted 45 percent of the company's production. The company's pre-tax profits increased by 41 percent during the first quarter of 2013.

In an October 6 editorial, the *Island* newspaper warned the government not to accede to the protesters' demands. Dipped Product companies, it declared, "have reached standards of excellence and achieved global recognition." The *Island* called on the

government to reconsider even agreeing to the factory's eventual re-location, because that would send the wrong message to investors. The sole concern of the political and media establishment is to protect corporate profit interests.

The government earlier tried several times to reopen the factory but failed. The continued protests express not only widespread anger over the contaminated water but also the depth of hostility toward the brutal military attack on August 1. The killings and maimings shocked people, triggering open denunciations of the government and comments that drew parallels with the ruthless military operations in the island's north and east against Tamils.

Reluctantly, the government asked the state-owned Industrial Technology Institute (ITI), one of the country's premier research bodies, to investigate whether Weliweriya's water was contaminated. On August 12, ITI chairman W. Abewickrama told the media that high acidity was found in 41 water samples taken within a one-kilometre radius from the factory. He promised to hand a full report to the government within days. However, the report has not yet been published, pointing to a cover-up.

In another bid to deflect discontent, Rajapakse offered financial compensation to the families of the two killed students, Akila Dinesh and Ravishan Perera, and to the wife of Nilantha Pushpakumara, a young worker shot dead by troops.

Moves are also underway to make individual officers the scapegoats for the August 1st atrocity. Two weeks ago, the Army commander, Lieutenant General Daya Ratnayake, told a Court of Inquiry that the army "exceeded its legal duties" during the "shooting incidents." He said evidence was being gathered to frame court martial charges against "responsible officers." Several senior officers who led the army operation have been relieved of their duties.

Initially, the military and the government accused the August 1st protesters of acting as saboteurs and provoking the conflict. The military also claimed that its officers had to shoot unarmed people as a matter of self defence. Now the government is trying to wash its hands of the crime.

In reality, the government is fully responsible for what occurred on August 1st. It ordered the army mobilisation for the purpose of violently suppressing

the demonstration. Rajapakse is extremely conscious that the protests against the Weliweriya factory are a sign of a much broader social explosion building up against his government's austerity measures.

On July 3, just a month before the Weliweriya military operation, Rajapakse issued an order calling on the armed forces "to maintain public order" in all districts throughout the country. The government's latest bans on protests are yet another warning to the working class it will stop at nothing to suppress rising social discontent.



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