

Sri Lanka: Pro-government forces issue death threats against Jaffna university teachers and students

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University of Jaffna teachers in military-occupied northern Sri Lanka held a silent protest last Friday at noon, condemning death threats issued against them and student leaders by suspected military-backed thugs.

Teachers marched around the university premises and picketed at the entrance. They held placards with slogans such as: “Are extra-judicial killings of teachers and the threatening of professors and students a wonder of Asia?” Other placards asked: “Is a university an academic field or a killing field?” “Does student education mean arbitrarily closing the university?” and “Are threats or intimidation not terrorism?”

Threatening notices were dumped on the university premises on Tuesday last week, headed: “Terrorism will not be allowed to rise again.” They were issued anonymously under a false name: “Student Force to Defend the Country.”

The threats were issued after President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government declared a “heroes month” to celebrate its military victory against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in May 2009. The government is preparing military parades and other “Heroes Victory” events to whip up anti-Tamil communalism.

At the same time, the military has banned any commemoration by people in the island’s north of the deaths of their family members. According to UN estimates, an estimated 40,000 people were killed in the army’s final assaults in Mulliwaikkal during 2009.

The threatening notices falsely accused the dean of the arts faculty V.P. Sivanathan, university teachers’ union leader Rasakumaran, student union leader Subahar, and the student leaders of the arts and science faculties, Gomas and Venukoban, of seeking to revive

the LTTE inside the university.

The notices claimed that “those lecturers and students were subjected to long time observation and even directly warned, but it was useless.” The leaflets declared a last warning, saying “we can’t guarantee your life”—clearly a death threat.

The military ordered the university to shut down from May 16 to 21, but publicly denied involvement in the closure. Students who are staying at hostels were told to leave before May 16.

Last Wednesday, the Jaffna military commander, Major General Udaya Perera, summoned the university vice chancellor, deans and student leaders to a military-controlled resort in Jaffna and informed them that holding any collective remembrance of the 2009 killings was prohibited. Perera also warned that no commemoration of the LTTE would be allowed. He instructed students to concentrate on their studies and avoid political issues.

Addressing a press conference, military spokesperson Brigadier Ruwan Wanigasooriya “categorically” denied any ban on commemorations, but insisted that it was not permissible to “commemorate LTTE members and persons who worked and associated with them.”

This is not the first time that such an intimidation campaign has been unleashed in the university. It was closed last November, with authorities claiming that students planned to commemorate the LTTE’s “heroes day” on November 27—the anniversary of ex-LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran’s birthday—to remember LTTE members who were killed in the war.

A year earlier, in November 2012, several Jaffna University student leaders were arrested and detained for several weeks on bogus charges that they had

celebrated the LTTE's "heroes day." A protest by students against the arrests was brutally attacked by the military and police.

The latest threats come amid a government and media campaign of witch hunting and intimidation, focused on accusations that the LTTE is being revived in the island's north with the help of the overseas Tamil Diaspora. As part of this offensive, the government banned 16 Tamil groups, as well as their members functioning in Western countries.

Wartime military practices, such as cordoned-off search operations, house-to-house inquiries and roadblocks, have also been reinstituted. In recent months, the government has arrested more than 60 people, alleging they have tried to resuscitate the LTTE, and detained them under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). However, no charges have been laid against any of those arrested, underscoring the unsubstantiated nature of the allegations.

The stepped-up military operations followed the arrest in March of a human rights activist, Balendran Jeyakumari, in Kilinochchi, accused of harbouring a new LTTE leader, named Gobi. The military later announced that it had killed three leaders, including Gobi, in a major northern military operation. All the circumstances pointed to the entire operation being stage-managed.

The military has since extended similar operations to the island's east. Last week, about 15 eastern villages were cordoned off and searched from early morning. According to reports, soldiers interrogated youth aged over 15.

The military occupation of the north is being strengthened. Military intelligence officers are operating inside the university, and soldiers are engaged in collecting details of families in Jaffna.

Military personnel also visited schools last month in Mannar district, photographing the teachers and senior students, and collecting their details. A similar operation was conducted in Jaffna, in the name of the military providing physical training for students.

A Jaffna University student told the WSWs that the closure of the campus is an anti-democratic act, and affects students' studies. "If they close the campus on every occasion, our future will be jeopardised and it will take time to finish our studies. Time will not wait

for us. We are targeted continuously. There must be an end to this."

This repression is escalating, despite the Rajapakse government facing an international probe into its 2009 war crimes by the Office of the United Nation Human Rights Commissioner.

The government's intimidation and communalism is not just directed against people in the north and east. The government is seeking to implement further austerity measures against the entire working class in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government has to cut budget expenditure deeper this year to meet the IMF's deficit target of 5.2 percent of gross domestic product. Last year, the deficit figure was reduced to 5.9 percent.

As the economic and social tensions intensify, the government is escalating its communalist campaign in order to divert discontent within the working class and youth, and divide them along ethnic lines. The Sri Lankan ruling elite has resorted to this poisonous politics for decades. Working people must oppose the repression in the north and take it as a warning of what is being prepared throughout the country.



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