

Sri Lankan think tank criticises mass evictions in Colombo

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A report entitled *Forced Eviction in Colombo—The Ugly Price of Beautiful Cation*, issued by a Sri Lankan think tank, has highlighted aspects of the mass evictions of poor families from the capital. The removal of hundreds of thousands of people is a central project of President Mahinda Rajapakse's government, intended to convert Colombo into the "commercial hub of South Asia" and attract foreign investors.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) report explains that, according to one statement by Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, 70,000 families are to be evicted, but in another statement he put the number of families as high as 135,000. This indicates that anywhere between 280,000 and 500,000 people will be uprooted.

The report likens the Colombo evictions to the military's methods "employed in the North and East," on a scale that "according to some estimates, could even dwarf the displacements in Northern Sri Lanka during the final two years of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)."

During the war against the separatist LTTE, the military destroyed many houses, displaced nearly 300,000 people, and killed tens of thousands in the northern Vanni area. After the war, people were "resettled" without basic facilities, creating the conditions for the military and investors to grab their land.

The report quotes Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, repeatedly declaring that the government's goal is to transform Colombo into a slum-free, "world-class," "garden city" and a "preferred destination for international business and tourism."

The militarisation of Colombo and its suburbs has been intensified to carry out this project. In May 2010, just a year after its military victory over the LTTE, the

government placed the Urban Development Authority (UDA), a civilian institution, under the Defence Ministry headed by Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Armed troops helped evict people from their slums or houses, disregarding legal titles and flouting laws.

As the report notes: "The UDA undertook the first of its military-backed evictions when bulldozers accompanied by armed soldiers demolished the homes and businesses of a small lower-middle class community on Mews Street in Colombo's Slave Island."

Residents were given no advance notice of the demolition and not compensated. Homes were demolished to build a school for military officers' children. After nearly four years, most residents have not been properly resettled. Instead, they have been confined to temporary wooden huts at Thotalanga in Colombo's suburbs.

The report points to the "post-war militarisation of Sri Lanka, including at the level of municipalities." The military is engaged in "landscaping, building, cleaning and undertaking many tasks associated with municipality."

In addition, "various disciplinary regimes—from jaywalking fines to the 'environmental police' to control the access to the city—are in place and public spaces are constantly under surveillance, by the military and police."

Military surveillance was established during and after the demolitions and resettlement, and people have been compelled to approach military officers to make any complaints about the evictions.

While evicting the poor, the government is providing huge concessions to investors. In the report's words, the state's role has become ensuring "private capital will be met with attractive incentives and [that] a

conducive policy environment will be created.”

In one example the report cites, highly valued land in central Colombo was allocated to the Krrish Group from India for “multi-million dollar luxury mixed-use re-development.” The land was leased to the company for 99 years for just 5 billion rupees (\$US38 million). It enjoys a 10-year income tax holiday, concessionary 6 percent tax for the next 15 years, tax-free shareholder dividends for 11 years, and exemptions from a range of other taxes, duties and levies.

Recently the government passed the Strategic Development Act to provide other hotel and casino projects similar tax benefits, as well as reduced economic service charges, lower import duties and other concessions.

The study documents the World Bank’s support for the Colombo evictions. While claiming to be “strengthening peoples’ participation, local democracy, and accountability,” the bank provided a \$213 million loan to the Metro Colombo Urban Development Project, and allocated \$147 million for similar developments in Galle and Kandy.

The CPA’s report also examines the judiciary’s role in backing the government’s drive. Building on years of interventions in the judiciary by successive governments, the Rajapakse government arbitrarily removed a chief justice and appointed one who is close to the president. In one case, Chief Justice Mohan Peiris declared: “No one should obstruct ongoing development.”

In a Supreme Court case filed by the Mew Streets evictees, the UDA promised to build new houses, but not one was provided. When the residents returned to the court, it refused to uphold their rights. In another case, the court ordered residents of Java Lane, also in Slave Island, to leave by last December 1, a deadline that was later extended by five months. Once again, the residents were promised resettlement, but received no legal documents.

The CPA says it analysed the “forced evictions in Colombo in terms of not just the military but also the free market orientation of the Rajapakse administration.” The report speaks of “the power of domestic, regional and international real estate finance and capital.”

Despite laying bare some of these processes, the CPA, which functions as a policy adviser to the ruling

elite, declares that the government could, and should, shift its policy. It recommends a move away from viewing “low income people as impediments to adding social and economic value to the city.” The report urges the government to “revitalise democratic decision making” involving the Colombo municipal council, free the UDA from military control, and ensure credible judicial oversight. It also calls for adherence to laws regarding expropriation of land.

As the Rajapakse government’s record demonstrates, there is not the slightest prospect of any such reversal of its course. Nor would an alternative government led by the big business United National Party take a different path. The Colombo evictions are part of a broader attack on the rights of the working class, in order to provide facilities for international finance capital and enhance Sri Lanka’s position as a cheap labour platform.



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