

Sri Lanka: Sinhala-Buddhist mobs unleash violence against Muslims

Our correspondents
17 June 2014

On Sunday, Sinhala-Buddhist mobs mobilised by the extremist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), or Buddhist Brigade, burned down shops and houses owned by Muslims in the southern Sri Lankan town of Aluthgama, killing two people and injuring dozens.

The well-planned attack, which has intensified communal tensions in Sri Lanka, demonstrates how President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is encouraging fascist-type groups to divert growing opposition to its policies among working people.

BBS incited the attack while the police and its commandos looked on. Later, the government mobilised the army to the area with armoured cars. On Sunday and Monday nights, the police imposed curfews in Aluthgama and the nearby town of Beruwela, both Muslim majority areas. These interventions, after the police had provided a free hand to the BBS-inspired mobs, only added to the tension.

The BBS instigated the violence on Sunday afternoon, when it organised a meeting in Aluthgama, saying it was "protesting against an attack on a Buddhist priest" in the area. It was referring to an alleged assault on a Buddhist monk and his driver three days earlier, reportedly by Muslim youth. The police arrested two Muslims over the incident and they have been remanded for two weeks. Nevertheless, the incident became a pretext for the BBS to whip up communalism.

Speaking at the meeting, BBS leader Galagoda Aththe Gnasaara, a monk, publicly threatened Muslims. He declared: "In this country we still have a Sinhala police; we still have a Sinhala army. After today if a single Marakkalaya (a derogatory word for Muslims) or some other paraya (alien) touches a single Sinhalese ... it will be their end."

Madhumadhava Aravinda, a singer and a leader of

Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), another extremist party, sang a song calling for Sinhalese to rise up.

After the meeting, a mob of more than 1,000 started marching, shouting anti-Muslim slogans, through nearby Dharga Town, a predominantly Muslim area, toward the temple where the assaulted monk resided. The police permitted the march, while asking monks and other participants to travel in vehicles, claiming that there might be retaliation from Muslims. The police alleged that Muslims started pelting the vehicle procession with stones, triggering clashes.

Two Muslims, Mohommad Islam, 38, and Mohommad Siraz, 30, from Velivitiya village near Aluthgama were killed by blows to their heads. Mobs even attacked a village, Thunduva, six kilometres away from Aluthgama. Dozens of Muslims were injured, but many did not go to hospital, fearing for their safety. Around 30 Muslims and Sinhalese were admitted to Nagoda hospital in Kalutara district.

The government and the police allowed the carnage to take place. Eye-witnesses told WSWs reporters that police commandos observed the attacks. Even during the ensuing curfew, goons remained active and looted shops.

Yesterday afternoon, Champika Ranawake, a cabinet minister and JHU leader, was observed consoling injured Sinhalese thugs while Buddhist monks accompanied him, chanting religious sermons.

Yesterday also saw another attempt by Sinhalese gangs to go into Dharga Town, and tensions spread to other areas. According to media reports, some shops were attacked at Mawanella, in central province, and Badulla, in the central hills district.

The government announced a special meeting chaired by Prime Minister D. M. Jayaratna, and attended by several cabinet ministers, along with Muslim and other

religious leaders, to prepare a “mechanism” to prevent further violence. This is a complete cover-up. The government has close connections to the BBS and other extremist organisations. The *Colombotelegraph* web site reported that the monk Gnanasara who instigated the violence participated in the special meeting.

The latest violence is part of an escalating pattern. Even in Aluthgama itself, there was an earlier burning of a Muslim shop. More broadly, over the past two years there has been a spate of premeditated attacks on Muslims and also Christians by the BBS, Ravana Balakaya (Ravana Brigade) and Sihala Ravaya (echo of Sinhalese).

This year alone, the BBS has engaged in several high-profile acts of thuggery. On April 9, it broke up a press conference of a rival Buddhist group that called for ethnic and religious harmony. While police officers looked on approvingly, Gnanasara manhandled the monk leading that group. On April 22, a BBS mob stormed a Muslim minister’s office, claiming that a rival monk was hiding there.

Rajapakse, who is currently abroad, tweeted: “An investigation will be held for the law to take its course of action to bring to book those responsible for the incidents in Aluthgama.” He added: “The government will not allow anyone to take the law into their own hands. I urge all parties concerned to act in restraint.”

This is sheer hypocrisy. The Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists act with impunity, ignoring any law. Calling for “all parties” to show restraint effectively means blaming the Muslim victims of the violence. Rajapakse and his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, have patronised the extremist groups and promised to implement their demands favouring the Buddhist establishment.

While using the Buddhist extremists to incite anti-Muslim sentiment, Rajapakse and his government are also increasingly resorting to anti-Tamil communalism, claiming that the defeated separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is being revived.

The government is nervous about the developing opposition among working people and youth to its implementation of austerity measures. Most recently, despite being held back by the trade unions, power workers have held protests to demand salary increases. Across the public sector, employees have conducted pickets opposing the government’s attempt to slash

pension gratuities. University students, including in the northern and eastern provinces, have joined demonstrations against the government’s education cuts.

The Aluthgama violence must be a warning to the working class. Once again, as it has done repeatedly since formal independence in 1948, the Sinhala ruling elites are resorting to vicious chauvinism to split the working people along ethnic lines, and use the resulting clashes to boost police-state measures. Workers must condemn the filthy communal attack on Muslims, unify their struggles across ethnic divisions and fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government with a socialist program based on the common interests of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally.



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