

Sri Lankan government tries to whitewash anti-Muslim attacks

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19 June 2014

Amid continuing sporadic violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is trying to hide its political responsibility for the attacks incited by the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a Sinhala-Buddhist extremist group.

Assaults on Muslims began last Sunday after the BBS held a meeting at Aluthgama, 60 kilometres south of Colombo, and threatened the largely Muslim community (see "Sinhala-Buddhist mobs unleash violence against Muslims").

BBS secretary Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, a Buddhist monk, declared that if any Muslim or foreigner attacked a Sinhalese person "it will be their end." This fascistic group incited a mob of over 1,000 to go on a rampage that killed three people, injured scores and burned down shops and houses. On the same day, the attacks spread to nearby Beruwela town.

The government seized upon the violence to send armed military units and the notorious police special task force (STF) into the area, and to impose an indefinite curfew. On Monday night, under the cover of this curfew, and while army and police forces looked on, mobs ransacked the towns of Mathugama and Welipenna, several kilometres from Aluthgama. At Welipenna, nine houses and 26 shops were destroyed overnight by a mob of 50 to 60 men armed with guns, petrol bombs and knives.

Thugs also attacked a livestock farm owned by a Muslim and beat a 58-year-old Tamil worker to death. His co-worker was critically injured and admitted to hospital. In Badulla, in the central hill district, about 200 goons mobilised by the BBS attacked shops and forced others to close down. On Tuesday, the government partially lifted the Aluthgama curfew, from 8 a.m. to 12 noon.

Fearing violence, many Muslim students did not

attend school, even in Colombo.

Military-police control has been established over the targeted areas. Military spokesman Brigadier Ruwan Wanigasooriya said the army had been deployed to Aluthgama, Welipenna, Dhargatown, Beruwala and Magonna. In other areas, STF personnel were mobilised.

Amid growing anger over the attacks, the government put on a show of quelling violence. On Tuesday, police spokesman Ajith Rohana told the media that about 41 suspects—mostly Sinhalese—were arrested for involvement in riots. Twenty of them were produced before courts and remanded until June 29. Police obtained an order from the Mawanella Magistrate's Court to stop the BBS holding a rally in the town.

After allowing the mobs to act freely, Inspector General of Police N. K. Ilangakoon announced a police investigation into the Aluthgama violence. This will be a whitewash. Such inquiries are routinely used to smother criticism. Ilangakoon did not even mention the BBS, which whipped up the attacks.

Gnanasara, the monk who threatened Muslims and led the march by the Sinhalese mob, is openly roaming around in Colombo. He even held a press conference on Tuesday and denied that his organisation had any hand in the violence.

While letting the BBS culprits off the hook, the government issued warnings to the media, implying it was to blame for the communal carnage. An official statement asked "all media organisation to act with responsibility in reporting incidents that could harm religious coexistence in the country." It added: "Spreading rumours and issuing statements and releases with regard to yesterday's Aluthgama incident are against media culture and ethics."

It was not media rumours and incorrect reports that

provoked the attacks. In fact, almost all the print and electronic media in Colombo has engaged in self-censorship, mainly reporting government and police statements. Together with the government, the media has referred to violence against Muslims as “inter-religious” clashes, covering up the responsibility of Buddhist extremists.

The government also blamed social media, saying “minor incidents could be highlighted as major incidents using technology, as in the case of the Aluthgama incident.” It appears that Buddhist extremists used social media to incite the attacks, but the government’s criticism indicates preparations to impose social media restrictions, which it has been mulling for some time.

An editorial in the government-controlled *Daily News* echoed the government line: “The frenzy in some social media platforms to get word out on the incidents [in Aluthgama] indicates that those who want to exploit a situation to serve their own petty political ends need no special invitation to do so.”

The response of other parties to this major communal attack has highlighted their hypocrisy. The opposition United National Party declared that the government was favouring BBS and inciting communal conflicts to obtain political mileage. However, the UNP had a similar record in office, provoking communal attacks to divide the working class.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which backed the Rajapakse government’s communal war against the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Elam (LTTE), issued a statement condemning the violence, but did not even name the BBS. It appealed to people “from both communities to exercise restraint and preserve law and order.” This whitewashing of the Buddhist extremists is in line with JVP’s Sinhala communal outlook and its efforts to curry favour with such elements.

Rauf Hakeem, leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the main Muslim bourgeois party and a partner in the ruling coalition, told the AFP on Monday that the “government is responsible” for the attacks. On Tuesday, however, he backed down, declaring that the police were to blame. His party is coming under increasing pressure to quit the government. Yesterday it abstained on a parliamentary vote on a government motion to bar UN war crime investigators from entering the country.

Rajapakse is in damage control because the government undeniably allowed the BBS to hold the meeting that launched its provocation. The US, EU and Canada, which condemned the violent attack on Muslims, are also pressing for an international investigation into the government’s human rights violations during the final months of its military operations against the LTTE in 2009. These Western powers have no concern for human rights, but the US, in particular, is using the threat of an investigation to pressure the Colombo government to distance itself from China and line up with Washington’s military build-up against Beijing.

Rajapakse toured Beruwela yesterday to appease angry Muslim people. However, the government’s attempt to shield the BBS is significant. It is patronising similar fascist-type racist Buddhist groups, such as Ravana Balaya (Ravana Brigade) and Sihala Ravaya (Echo of Sinhalese). A Buddhist monks’ party, Jathika Hela Urumaya, is a partner in the ruling coalition.

As discontent grows among the working people over the government’s austerity and pro-big business measures, Rajapakse is increasingly dependent on these communalist organisations, and will not hesitate to unleash them against the working class and political opponents.



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