

Sri Lankan military warns against exposing its involvement in anti-Muslim violence

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An extraordinary statement by a Sri Lankan military spokesman last week has indicated the complicity of the military's intelligence units in the recent anti-Muslim attacks instigated by the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), or Buddhist Brigade, in Aluthgama and Beruwala in southern Sri Lanka. His remarks also pointed to the vast police-state apparatus developed by the military against the working class.

Following a provocative anti-Muslim meeting held by the BBS in Aluthgama town on June 15, Buddhist extremist thugs went on a rampage, looting and burning Muslim-owned houses and shops, killing two Muslims and a Tamil, and injuring some 60 others. All the violence happened in the presence of the security forces deployed by the government.

At a June 24 press conference, military spokesman Brigadier Ruwan Wanigasooriya stated: "We have received credible information that some politicians using their parliamentary privileges are attempting to expose secret details about the country's intelligence units." Declaring that revealing the names of intelligence officers would "place their lives in danger," Wanigasooriya warned politicians "not to make such an exposure."

Wanigasooriya's intervention was a pre-emptive move against any disclosure of the involvement of military intelligence officers with the BBS and other Buddhist chauvinist groups in instigating anti-Muslim attacks. President Mahinda Rajapakse's government and the military have been nervous about any exposure of their connections to such extremist groups. Wanigasooriya's warning, however, had a wider message. It was directed not just at politicians but against any revelation of the operations conducted by the military and its intelligence units against political opponents and working people.

In an apparent admission about the military intelligence's relationship with extremist groups, Wanigasooriya continued: "We have some units that deal with various groups. There should have been a communication between various groups. Our officers set up the background for that communication. Because of their above said works, we could be able to prevent what was going to happen just after Aluthgama."

These vague remarks raise many questions. What are the "various groups" that the intelligence units "deal with?" Although Wanigasooriya did not name them, given the experience of the recent anti-Muslim attacks, it is apparent who they are. Why didn't these same intelligence officials intervene to stop the BBS holding the provocative rally that ignited Buddhist mobs against Muslims? Clearly, the intelligence units are cooperating with Sinhala-Buddhist communalist forces like the BBS, Ravana Balaya and Sinhala Ravaya.

Wanigasooriya's remarks indicate how far the military has extended its activities into the political arena. The military has developed a vast intelligence apparatus that has insinuated itself into aspects of society. The fact that Wanigasooriya publicly came out against parliamentarians making political comments demonstrates that the military is aggressively working to assert its dominance within the Colombo establishment. Nearly three decades of war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated in 2009, has strengthened the military's position in ruling circles.

After insisting that "some politicians" must not "expose" intelligence officers, Wanigasooriya added: "If this happened, it would be the second incident after the Millennium City safe house exposure, where at least 21 intelligence officers had to sacrifice their lives in 2002 because of that betrayal."

This reference to the “Millennium City safe house exposure” is significant. A police raid on an army “safe house” on Colombo’s outskirts on January 2, 2002, during an investigation into the murder of 10 youth on an election day, December 5, 2001, provided a glimpse of the military’s dirty operations. Operating under the auspices of the Directorate of Military Intelligence, the unit in the army safe house had carried out covert operations in the war against the LTTE. It emerged that such units had long been deployed, not only against the LTTE but also against political opponents of the government in the country’s south.

Seeking to legitimise his threat against any disclosure of the military’s activities, Wanigasooriya resorted to the bogus “international conspiracy” claim, repeatedly uttered by Rajapakse and his government. He said: “A certain Western embassy has inquired of another party: ‘Isn’t what happened [in Aluthgama] enough for you to implement the rest as we instruct you to do?’ Don’t ask me what country and what party.” Like Rajapakse, Wanigasooriya would not name the “foreign power” or provide any evidence, but accused it of “aiming to set this country in flames using various parties in this country.”

The immediate target of Wanigasooriya’s warning was opposition United National Party (UNP) parliamentarian Mangala Samaraweera. When Samaraweera held a press conference within hours of the military spokesman’s statement, it became obvious that Wanigasooriya’s threat had worked. Samaraweera named three top military intelligence officers, whom he accused of encouraging the BBS to instigate anti-Muslim attacks. But the trio—defence ministry advisor General (Retd) Kapila Hendawitharana, Colonel Suresh Salley and State Intelligence Service chief Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Chandra Wakishta—are publicly known figures. Samaraweera did not identify any intelligence officer directly involved with communalist groups at the ground level.

Nevertheless, Samaraweera’s press conference outraged the government and military, which unleashed a frenzied media campaign against him. On June 25, police spokesman Ajith Rohana announced an investigation of Samaraweera for “divulging official secrets” under the 1955 Official Secrets Act. Rohana said the police would “seek the Attorney General’s advice regarding further action against him

[Samaraweera] following an initial investigation.”

Responding defensively to the police-military threats and possible prosecution, the UNP denied that Samaraweera divulged any state secrets. UNP parliamentarian Ajith P. Perera told the media on June 27: “Everyone who has followed current affairs is aware that the persons whose names were mentioned [by Samaraweera] were involved in the defence sector in the country.”

Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, later warned Samaraweera by name. On June 29, the ColomboPage web site reported that Rajapakse said “the people would answer the opposition United National Party parliamentarian Mangala Samaraweera if he ‘fails to apply brakes’ to his mouth.” Here the threat is crystal clear. “The people” means nothing but the military’s death squads and fascistic thugs. That is how the government silences its critics.



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