

Sri Lankan government imposes political gag on NGOs

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President Mahinda Rajapakse's Sri Lankan government this week banned Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) from issuing media releases, holding news conferences, conducting workshops and training journalists.

This is a dictatorial attack on fundamental democratic rights, seeking to suppress any opposition to the government and taking a further step toward a police state. While the immediate aim is to gag NGOs, the government's action sets a precedent for wider use, including against political parties, in preparation for deeper attacks on the working class.

D. M. S. Dissanayake, director of the National Secretariat of NGOs, which functions under the defence ministry, issued a letter outlining the new restrictions on July 8. The letter stated: "It has been revealed that certain NGOs conduct news conferences, hold workshops, train journalists, and issue news releases, which is beyond their mandate." It insisted that "all NGOs should desist from such unauthorised activities with immediate effect."

This means that not only the specified activities have been banned, but NGOs cannot conduct any activity without the military's authorisation.

Military spokesman Brigadier Ruwan Wanigasooriya, speaking at a media briefing, tried to play down the directive, saying it was just a "reminder" to act according to a "mandate" previously issued. However, until now, NGOs in Sri Lanka have held media conferences and workshops and issued press releases, despite continuous harassment by successive governments.

When a journalist asked whether the move sought to silence NGOs in the context of the current UN investigation of Sri Lankan war crimes, the brigadier claimed there was "no such thing." The UN Human

Rights Commissioner recently appointed a panel to probe human rights violations committed during the final months of the military offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

The investigation was initiated by a US-sponsored resolution in a UN Human Rights Council meeting. Washington is using the issue to demand that Rajapakse's government sever its close relations with China. The government certainly fears that some pro-Western NGOs might give evidence on the many war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan military.

However, the military's move to directly control NGOs goes beyond such considerations. This is the first time that far-reaching restrictions have been imposed on these organisations. It is an indication the government is moving against all political opposition, particularly in the working class.

More than 1,000 national and international NGOs work in Sri Lanka. Previous regulations, issued from the 1980s onward, were mainly administrative in character. NGOs were registered under the health and social services ministry.

During the war against the LTTE, the military sought to suppress these organisations. One prominent case involved the killing of 17 aid workers from Action Against Hunger, or ACF, in August 2006 in the eastern town of Muttur. They were murdered, execution style, at the very beginning of the Rajapakse government's renewal of the war.

Throughout the final two years of the war, the government prohibited or restricted NGOs including the International Red Cross, operating in the northern Vanni area. This was designed to starve Tamil people and deprive them of medical supplies, as well as prevent the leaking of any information about the

military's war crimes.

After the war, as part of the government's intensified militarisation of the country, the NGO secretariat was placed under the defence ministry's control in April 2010. Organisations were registered only after being vetted, using military intelligence information. NGO trustees, funding sources, agendas and programs of work had to be approved.

The sweeping surveillance and underhanded activities conducted by the military intelligence service has been exposed by many of its operations against critics of the government and the security forces. In May, the military intelligence authorities blocked a workshop organised for Tamil journalists by Transparency International (TI), an internationally-affiliated NGO, at a hotel in Polonnaruwa in the North Central Province. The hotel management abruptly cancelled the event on the military's orders.

In June, when the TI organised another workshop in Negombo, north of Colombo, a mob broke up the event. It is believed that the military intelligence service was behind the mobilisation of the thugs.

The NGOs Collective of Civil Society has declared it will ignore the ban and carry on its activities as in the past. Its statement said: "This [ban] is a serious blow to democracy in the country. We as part of civil society have the right to freedom of speech and association."

This police-state measure is driven by the government's nervousness about the developing opposition among working people, youth and the rural poor against its attacks on living conditions and social rights. Recent protests by workers in the power sector, railways and health and continuous protests by university students are just indications of deepening discontent.

Alongside its attack on democratic rights, the government is seeking to stir communalism against Tamils and Muslims, in order to split and divert the working class. The recent attack instigated by the Buddhist extremist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) against Muslims in Aluthgama and Beruwela underscored this renewed campaign. The BBS is patronised by the government and enjoys the backing of the security forces.

Interviewed by the *Daily Mirror* on July 1, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, whitewashed the role of the Buddhist

extremists and recalled his previous remarks about threats against the government. He was referring to a speech at the defence academy in June 2013, where he declared: "Although the likelihood of events such as the Arab Spring transpiring in Sri Lanka is minimal... this is yet another threat that needs to be monitored."

"Arab Spring" was the label given to the revolutionary upsurge of the working class in Egypt that reverberated across the Middle East. The Rajapakse government and the military are preparing to meet similar struggles with repressive and anti-democratic measures.



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