

# Sri Lankan government to deport Pakistani and Afghan refugees

W. A. Sunil  
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The Rajapakse government is preparing to deport more than 1,500 Pakistani and Afghan asylum seekers who have apparently fled to rural areas in Sri Lanka. The police have arrested 144 Pakistanis, who are now incarcerated in a detention camp at Boosa, near the southern port city of Galle. According to the *Sunday Times*, 45 Afghans were rounded up last Friday.

The government's decision to hand over the refugees to the very governments responsible for their repression—a blatant attack on democratic rights—is part of an anti-Muslim communal campaign recently instigated by Sinhala-Buddhist extremists. In line with this assault, the Rajapakse government has withdrawn previously granted on-arrival visas for Pakistanis.

On July 6, Sri Lanka's immigration controller, Chulananda Perera told the media that the asylum seekers were “a harmful element to our country.” He asserted: “They come here on visit visas and then register with the UNHCR [UN High Commission for Refugees] as asylum seekers. They should be deported.”

Perera failed to explain why the asylum seekers were “harmful.” He simply repeated racist claims that the Pakistanis were engaged in “illegal activities,” “taking local jobs” and could be “terrorist elements.”

Sri Lanka has not ratified the international Refugee Convention but under a “working agreement” signed with the UNHCR in 2005 agreed to let refugees stay until their cases were examined and they could be relocated to a third country. By arresting and moving to deport Muslim refugees, the government is breaching even that limited agreement. The UNHCR, which has been barred access to the detainees, has warned that any deportations would be a breach of international law.

The crackdown against Pakistani and Afghan refugees is bound up with intensified government-assisted violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka. On June 15, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), or Buddhist Brigade, provoked an attack on

Muslims in Aluthgama and Beruwela which killed three people, injured scores and destroyed many homes and properties. Sri Lankan security forces allowed thugs to carry out these attacks. The government whitewashed the BBS, with which it has close ties, while blaming Muslims for “extremism.”

The Sinhala-chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a partner in Rajapakse's ruling coalition, is a vociferous supporter of the anti-Muslim campaign. JHU general secretary and technology minister Patali Champika Ranawaka recently told a Sinhala gathering in the Aluthgama area that “religious refugees who spread extremist religions were already in Sri Lanka” and legal registration of the asylum seekers was a “peculiar situation.”

According to the media, more than 1,400 of the targeted 1,547 refugees have been registered as asylum seekers at the UNHCR office in Colombo. The majority are Pakistani members of the Ahmadiya Islamic sect. Others include Pakistani Shiite Muslims and Christians and 75 refugees from war-torn Afghanistan.

The harassment of religious minorities is legalised through the penal code in Pakistan, a state established on religious foundations as part of the communalist partition of British India in 1947. Under Pakistan law, the death penalty can be imposed for “defaming religion.” In 2009, at least 50 Ahmadis were charged under this so-called blasphemy law.

Religious minorities are frequently targeted by extremists from the Sunni sect, the majority of Muslims in Pakistan. In September 2013, 85 people were killed when thugs attacked a Peshawar church. At least three Christians were put to death for blasphemy that year.

The Pakistani government has backed the planned Sri Lankan deportations, declaring that the refugees are “economic migrants defiling the country's image.” Successive Pakistani governments endorsed Colombo's

war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), providing military hardware and advice when the Rajapakse government renewed the war in 2006.

While some of the Pakistani and Afghan refugees in Sri Lanka had temporary work, most depend on donations from churches and mosques to sustain their families. The families of those arrested not only face economic hardships but now live in fear of communal attacks by Sinhala-Buddhist extremists.

Human rights groups have denounced the Rajapakse government's violation of international refugee law. The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network demanded that the government immediately stop "arresting and arbitrarily detaining refugees and asylum seekers and provide the UNHCR with immediate access to those who have been detained."

In an attempt to justify its deportation of refugees, the Rajapakse government has claimed—without the slightest evidence—that there may be terrorists among them. This is being backed by the Colombo media, with *Ceylon Today's* Sunday issue headlined "Does Sri Lanka Faces Al Qaeda Threat?"

Through such inflammatory claims, the Colombo establishment is deliberately fanning Sinhala chauvinism against Muslims and Tamils, in order to divide the working class and divert growing opposition among working people and youth against its austerity measures, which are eroding living conditions and basic rights.

While the government claims that its military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009 has established peace and democracy, its attacks on the democratic rights of both Sinhala and Tamil-speaking working people are continuing. As part of its assault, the government has insisted that Sri Lankan refugees seeking asylum in other countries must be deported back home, so that they can be interrogated and their plight used to intimidate working people.

This week, in a blatant breach of international law, Australia and Sri Lanka engaged in the secret transfer of over 40 refugees who were trying to reach Australia by sea.



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