

Murder of Tamil student sparks protests in northern Sri Lanka

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Protests have erupted across Sri Lanka's war-ravaged north and east over the rape and murder of an 18-year-old Tamil student in Punguduthivu, a small island west of the Jaffna Peninsula.

Vithya Sivalohanathan, an advanced-level student from Punguduthivu College disappeared on May 13 after leaving for school. Her body was later found in an abandoned house. She had been raped. Police have so far arrested four people suspected of committing the gruesome crime.

On May 15, students and teachers in Punguduthivu protested over the murder while demanding protection for all students. Campaigns have also been held at several other places throughout Jaffna.

On Wednesday, the day the murder suspects were scheduled to appear in court, residents held a "hartal"—a strike and business shutdown—in the Jaffna district, closing schools, businesses and stopping all transport. Sympathetic workers struck for several hours. Thousands of people gathered at various places in Jaffna to express their anger, including near the court premises. Many residents suspect that criminal gangs are operating throughout the region with the backing of the security forces.

The government of President Maithripala Sirisena responded by mobilising hundreds of armed police, including police commandos, along with the military throughout Jaffna. Police used tear gas to disperse demonstrators as the suspects were brought to the court.

About 130 people were arrested during the protests, accused of throwing stones and damaging public property. On Thursday, a Jaffna magistrate remanded the arrested protestors until June 2.

Demonstrations were also held on May 21 in Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Mullaithivu and Mannar districts in the North Province, and Batticaloa and Trincomalee towns in the Eastern Province.

Sri Lankan Inspector General of Police N. K. Ilangakoon has been sent to Jaffna to "assess" the situation and "instruct for further actions," which only means beefing up police measures against local residents.

The demonstrations are the largest in Sri Lanka's north for several years. While residents voiced their anger and concern over the shocking crime, the protests reflect deep-seated opposition to the situation facing Tamils after nearly three decades of repression and a civil war that claimed about 200,000 deaths.

May 19 marked the sixth anniversary of the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). During the final months of the war, tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed in murderous attacks by the Sri Lankan military. Sri Lankan President Sirisena and his United National Party (UNP)-led government celebrated the victory on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces remain occupied by the military and the scars of the war remain. Tens of thousands of residents have no proper income and most of the land seized by the military during the war has not been returned to their owners.

Many Tamils are homeless and still living in makeshift camps without basic facilities. Youth unemployment is endemic. Young people released from military detention camps, after years of incarceration, are still considered LTTE suspects.

Various Tamil bourgeois politicians, including those from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), have demanded the death penalty for those found guilty of last week's murder. Ruling UNP parliamentarian Vijayakala Maheswaran has also called for "public execution of the killers."

Such reactionary populist demands only strengthen the capitalist state and are aimed at politically diverting attention from the worsening social conditions facing the

Sri Lankan masses, Tamil and Sinhalese alike.

TNA leader and Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran issued a statement on Wednesday condemning those accused of damaging property during the protests. The Tamil elite fear that any social unrest over the horrendous social conditions in the North and East could jeopardise a future power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government.

“In this situation,” Wigneswaran said, “we must cooperate with the police [and] not see them as an enemy. It is very clear that there are some malicious people looking for a fight by creating disagreements between us and the police, and trying to sabotage the situation.”

At the same time, Sinhala extremists, such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), have seized on the protests to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism, claiming that the defeated LTTE is behind the demonstrations.

The JHU, which is a supporter of President Sirisena and part of the UNP-led government, has called on the police and the military to impose “law and order” in the North. JHU media secretary Nishantha Sri Warnasinghe falsely claimed that Sinhalese residents were being threatened in Jaffna and told to leave the region. He also declared that “racist, separatist and terrorist groups are trying to raise their heads again by hiding behind this incident.”

Referring to the protests in Jaffna, former President Mahinda Rajapakse told a public meeting in the rural town of Mahiyangana: “The LTTE too began in a similar fashion. This is a dangerous situation. Therefore the police should act immediately. The law should take its course, whether it is the North or the South of the country.” Hinting at LTTE involvement, Rajapakse declared the demonstrations were “well organised.”

Rajapakse is attempting to make a political come-back by whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism. Likewise, the Sirisena government faces a deepening economic and political crisis and is exploiting communal tensions to divide the working masses and defend capitalist rule.



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