

Sri Lankan government to convert Western province into investment hub

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The Sri Lankan government has announced that it will commence work this month on its so-called Western Region Megapolis Project (WRMP). Touting it as a “flagship project,” the government aims to merge the Colombo, Gampaha and Kaluthara districts and create a cluster of towns and cities with new infrastructure to attract foreign investment.

The project involves clearing land for the development of financial districts, shopping complexes, hotels, condominiums and leisure parks, as well as improved harbour and airport infrastructure. Thousands of workers and lower income residents will be forced out to make way for the project.

WRMP minister Champika Ranawaka told the media on March 1 that the project will start in parts of Colombo and 23 townships and include minimising road congestion and flooding problems, as well as new parks.

The WRMP is more ambitious than the project initiated by former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who promised to convert Colombo into a major South Asian commercial and tourist hub. The Urban Development Authority (UDA) was brought under the control of the defence ministry secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, who employed military methods to clear land ear-marked for investors.

The UDA demolished hundreds of shanties, small houses and small businesses and started to evict 60,000 people. Protests against evictions were suppressed using the military and police (see: “Thousands of Colombo slum dwellers rounded up by Sri Lankan military”).

The Rajapakse government’s plan was mainly concentrated on Colombo. The WRMP, which is being unveiled under conditions of a deepening global economic crisis, includes three districts with a

combined population of six million, the majority of them poor. According to the latest estimates, the grandiose project, which requires \$US40 billion for new infrastructure, will be completed in three phases between 2016 and 2030. Colombo city will function as its epicenter.

The WRMP is a desperate attempt by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to attract international investors to take advantage of Sri Lanka’s cheap labour and low taxes.

Wickremesinghe claims he developed the plan in 2004 on the advice of Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. The Singapore autocrat used police-state methods to convert the small island state into major international commercial, industrial and financial centre. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are resorting to similar measures to suppress opposition to the WRMP by workers, students and poor peasants.

Officially launching the project on January 29, Wickremesinghe declared: “[T]he world is supporting us today. We have to utilise the foreign aid and attract more investments by grabbing this opportunity.”

Wickremesinghe’s boast of “world support” follows the ousting of Rajapakse in a US-backed regime-change operation in the January 2015 presidential election. Washington was hostile to Rajapakse as a result of his economic and political ties with Beijing. The US, along with India, Japan and the European Union, has provided political backing for the new government.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, who was installed as prime minister, rapidly shifted foreign policy away from China and toward the US. Previous multi-billion investment agreements with Beijing for construction of the Colombo Port City Project have been scaled down

to satisfy US and India, although the government is still seeking Chinese investment in other ventures.

WRMP minister Champika Ranawaka told the state-run *Daily News* on January 29 the Megapolis project was “based on economic prosperity, social justice, environmental sustainability and people’s quality of life.” The government, he admitted, had to deal with “the issues concerning slum dwellers.” He said in Colombo alone there were 68,000 families and over 100,000 in the Western Province.

“The country needs to have proper housing and social mobilisation programs to transform the lives of these slum dwellers to live a quality life in dignity,” Ranawaka said.

This is a lie. “Social mobilisation” is simply another name for the eviction and relocation of the poor. Like the former Rajapakse administration, Ranawaka cynically claimed there would be dwellings provided for those evicted. The government, however, has no plans to build the required number of homes.

“The benefits are much greater and have a positive impact on a much larger community than those who are negatively impacted initially,” Ranawaka said, citing the Mahaweli Agricultural Project. This scheme, which displaced thousands of poor farmers, was forcibly imposed by the United National Party government of President J.R. Jayawardene during the 1980s.

Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and their parties previously exploited the anger of shanty dwellers who were evicted under Rajapakse, but the present government’s political agenda and class hostility toward the poor is no different.

Ranawaka told a recent meeting that Sri Lanka’s shanty dwellers were mostly “drug addicts, drug peddlers or alcoholics or underworld thugs.” The Rajapakse government similarly slandered Colombo slum-dwellers as a “social evil.”

In recent weeks, UDA officials have ruthlessly moved against Colombo shanty dwellers in line with the government’s megapolis project.

On February 12, UDA officers demolished small huts in Colombo’s coastline suburbs—from Wellawatta to Galkissa. Four days later, the UDA sent workers with backhoes to demolish about 250 makeshift huts at Thotalanga in Colombo, where hundreds of poor are living.

When residents opposed the UDA’s destructive

operations and blocked local highways, the government mobilised special task force police to attack them. The Thotalanga shanty-dwellers refused to leave and are now living in plastic-covered sheds. Last week, they were threatened by a UDA project director—a military brigadier—who declared they had two weeks to vacate the area.



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