

Sri Lankan armoury explosion forces thousands to flee

W. A. Sunil
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A massive explosion in an armoury at the Salawa army camp on Sunday forced thousands of people to flee their homes, fearing for their lives. The military complex is located in a highly-populated area at Kosgama, just 33 kilometres east of Colombo. So far, one soldier's death has been reported and about 50 people have been treated for injuries or respiratory problems.

Sri Lankan soldiers and police were yesterday trying to find and defuse unexploded bombs or rockets that fell on villages. Hundreds of homes were destroyed after the raging ammunition fire triggered a series of blasts that sent shrapnel flying into the air. AFP said its photographer saw commandos collecting four unexploded rockets from one house garden.

Residents did not know such a huge armoury had been set up near their villages. It was one of the biggest ammunition storages in the country, with a large stock of rocket-propelled grenade shells and heavy artillery weapons. According to some media reports, there were 600 containers of ammunition.

The blaze broke out at about 5:30 p.m. on Sunday and continued till 10:00 a.m. on Monday. The intensity of the explosions and fire was such that the fire brigade could only reach two kilometres from the location. Colombo Fire Brigade chief operating officer Rohitha Fernando said: "None of the trucks have entered the camp as it's not safe to go inside. We have not handled this magnitude of armoury fire."

It was the largest ammunition blast since an armoury explosion at Vavuniya in Northern Province during 2009. No explanation has yet been provided by the government or the military authorities.

Hearing huge noises, panic-stricken people around the army camp ran to seek safety. The police and the army then issued an announcement, asking those living

within a five-kilometre radius to vacate the area. Many people were seen running, some unable to access a vehicle. The main highway running past the military complex was closed five kilometres on either side.

Many residents stayed at wayside shelters, while others took refuge at temples or schools. Some people returned to their homes yesterday to see destroyed or damaged houses. However, residents who live within a one-kilometre radius were barred from returning to their homes. The army said the area would be cleaned up by Thursday.

One resident, Trince Samantha Lal, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Suddenly we heard a huge explosion, like thunder. When we came out of the house we saw huge black smoke coming from the camp and the explosions were continuing. The police said to vacate the area, but people had not enough facilities. With my family, we went to my mother's house about six kilometres away from the camp. Some who fled the area spent the night at temples and schools and some stayed with their friends and relatives."

Another resident living near Hanwella township, some four-and-a-half kilometres from the camp, said: "There was a bright orange glow in the sky around the camp and regular explosions with short intervals. About 15 kilos of debris from the explosion fell in the garden of my neighbour. The people in the area were panicked and terrified. Many people, including my family, walked some three kilometres for safety because there was a huge traffic block and no transport facilities."

According to the area administrative officer, M.M.S.K. Bandara, about 300 houses and two factories within one kilometre were destroyed. Many homes in villages near the army camp, including Salawa, Kaluaggala, Suduwella, Mavilgama, Katugoda north,

Akaravita, Bandigamapola and Kosgama north and east, have been badly damaged.

According to Bandara, about 18,628 people have been displaced. They are staying in 11 camps. People fear they will not be able to return to their houses. Many are relatively poor rural people. Behind the Salawa army complex there is also a village built for disabled soldiers and soldiers' widows. Residents have been warned not to drink water from wells until they are cleaned.

The armory was established, without the residents being informed, in early 2000 as part of the huge military buildup during the 26-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The military base took over a major complex of buildings from the liquidated state-owned Plywood Corporation.

Samantha Lal said during the war that the army brought arms to the camp. "When they brought them [the ammunition] they closed roads and number of army trucks would come. But people did not know what was going on, or the size of the armoury, or the danger they would face in an incident like this."

Locating a major ammunition depot in a residential area underscores the utter disregard of successive governments for the lives of the ordinary people. All the establishment parties are directly responsible for the catastrophe.

In an attempt to deflect blame, former President Mahinda Rajapakse claimed that his administration had planned to relocate the ammunition dump from the built-up area before he was defeated in the January 2015 presidential election.

Fearing that the disaster will intensify his government's political crisis, President Maithripala Sirisena called a national security council meeting yesterday and ordered a court of inquiry to investigate the cause of the explosion. Law and Order Minister Sagala Ratnayake said the government had also ordered an inquiry by the police criminal investigation department.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe visited the area yesterday and held a meeting with administrative officers. According to media reports, Wickremesinghe pledged to build or repair all the damaged houses. The army made a similar promise.

However, people expressed doubts about whether they will have their houses repaired and be able to

return. Just a month ago, hundreds of thousands of people in Colombo and suburbs, including in this area, fled their homes because of floods.



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