

# Sri Lankan residents demand removal of military armouries following explosion

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The recent explosions at the Sri Lankan army's main weapons storage centre at Salawa in the Colombo district, which destroyed the homes and livelihoods of nearby residents, has produced demands for the removal of the armouries.

The explosions and fire erupted on June 5 at about 5.30 p.m. and continued until the next morning, scattering shells and other military debris in a three- to five-kilometre radius. The area, which looked like a war zone the next day, contained 8,000 tonnes of arms and ammunition, including heavy artillery, 60mm mortars, multi-barrel rockets and rocket-propelled grenades.

In the aftermath of the disaster, thousands of people, not just those immediately affected by the explosions but across the country, have begun to understand the impact on those living in the north and eastern war zones during Colombo's 30-year war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

As one local housewife who lived near the Salawa camp told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "What we experienced was destruction caused by an accidental explosion in the army camp. This gives us a glimpse of what the situation would have been like for those in the north when the military was engaged in targeted bombings."

An anonymous bomb disposal expert told Sri Lanka's weekly English-language *Sunday Times*: "It is very fortunate that none of the bombs exploded outside the camp. Had they exploded there, the devastation to life and property would have been much greater."

Local residents impacted by the explosions immediately began holding street protests, blocking the Colombo Awissawella Highway at Salawa junction in Kosgama, 33 kilometres east of Colombo.

Demonstrators denounced the callous attitude of Sri

Lankan governments, past and present, for placing a vast stock of deadly weapons in densely populated areas. They also criticised government delays in assisting affected families and called for damage compensation, removal of tons of debris and immediate action to ensure water and electricity supplies.

The June 5 explosion also triggered a mass protest by residents in Veyangoda, 38 km north of Colombo, the site of another Sri Lankan armoury. The area reportedly contains weapons stocks that were transferred from Salawa at the end of the war in 2009. Another demonstration was held by residents of Malabe, a Colombo suburb, in opposition to an Atomic Energy Authority nuclear laboratory located in the area.

Veyangoda and Malabe residents and their families said they were concerned that their homes could be hit by explosions like the one that occurred in Salawa.

According to the government, the June 5 disaster killed one soldier, severely injured eight civilians and displaced over 7,700 people. While most of those displaced have returned to their homes, 1,318 remain in temporary accommodation.

A total of 650 houses have been damaged and hundreds of other buildings, including the Kosgama government hospital, a garment factory and dozens of shops, restaurants and other small businesses. "Had the explosion occurred during the night," residents say, "the disaster would have been more terrible and at least several hundred people would have been killed."

The cause of the blast is still unclear. Government investigator Sakuntala Tennekoon told the media last week, "My team is still working. That is all I can tell you."

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, accompanied by several ministers and dozens of officials, visited the disaster area twice within a week, claiming that there

would speedy reconstruction work and offering payments. In 10 days the government paid 90 families whose homes were badly damaged, the first of three 50,000-rupee (\$US343) rental compensation payments while their properties were being repaired.

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According to the media, the army's engineering division, which is in charge of house rebuilding and repair, completed work on 41 houses within a week. The government has also mobilised over 70 assessors to estimate the value of the lost property of each family.

The decision to address some of the myriad problems now facing the Salawa victims is not animated by any humanitarian concern but fears that the army has been seriously discredited by the explosion. This is obvious when compares the government indifference and sluggishness towards the disastrous conditions still confronting thousands of flood victims, in rural and urban areas throughout Sri Lanka.

It is also highlighted by Wickremesinghe's comments to Salawa residents: "All area politicians will put aside their political differences to work for the people of Salawa. No one should confront the army. There was a sinister move to create a rift between the army and the residents."

The government is also fearful of re-emergence of mass protests by Tamils and Muslims in Sri Lanka's north and east, who demanded removal of military camps established during the war through the forcible acquisition of agricultural and residential land.

While successive Sri Lankan administrations are directly responsible for the latest disaster, the government and the opposition are blaming each other in a bid to divert mounting popular opposition against the entire political establishment.

As Shehan Christopher, a former soldier, told WSWS reporters visiting the explosion site, said: "The people in the area have known all along that the armoury was a great danger. They have demanded its removal from all successive governments but in vain. If the LTTE attacked the place during the war it would have been an immense disaster. If the authorities had listened to the people this disaster could be avoided"

Rajeswaree, a female worker from nearby Salawa rubber estate, said her house and many others in the plantation had been destroyed. "There are 16 members

in my family. We only escaped with the clothes we were wearing when the explosions started. Now we're left with nothing, not even our national identity cards, and are wondering how to survive in the coming days."



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