

Sri Lanka: Racialist attack on Muslims in Gintota

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Sinhala-Buddhist thugs unleashed a series of violent assaults on Muslims in the Gintota area near Galle, capital of southern Sri Lanka, last Friday night.

Three mosques were targeted and about 50 buildings, including houses and business places owned by Muslims, were damaged by club-wielding gangs. They set fire to properties and several vehicles in the Hapugala, Ampitiya, Gintota Galle Road and Weliwitimodara areas at about 8 p.m.

World Socialist Web Site correspondents visited the area on Saturday to investigate what had happened. Muslim residents told us that a number of Buddhist monks who were involved in organising the attack had held a meeting at Thuparamaya, a Buddhist temple in the area, two hours before the assault.

At 4.17 p.m. on Friday, an individual called Uchitha Arunodha Gunasekera posted a note on his Facebook page calling for everyone in the Galle area “to gather at the Thuparamaya temple in Gintota against Muslims.”

The violent attack was discussed and prepared at the temple with the encouragement of the monks who used a couple of relatively minor incidents earlier in the week to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment and initiate the rampage.

On November 13, a Muslim woman and her daughter were hit by a motor bike driven by a Sinhala youth. While all three people were injured and hospitalised, they were released after treatment later that day. The dispute over the accident was quickly settled between the two parties at a local police station with the motorbike rider paying 25,000 rupees as compensation to the woman and her daughter.

The next evening a conflict broke out between a few Sinhala and Muslim youths in the area with one Muslim youth injured and two Sinhala-owned homes attacked. Niyas Hussain, a United National Party

(UNP) local government representative, and two Sinhala youths were arrested in relation to the conflict.

The Sinhala extremists seized on these events and began targeting local Muslim families who had nothing to do with the incidents.

Police were deployed to local villages in the name of “maintaining peace” but their presence was no obstacle to the Sinhala thugs. In fact, the police declared a curfew at about 9 p.m. on Friday, an hour after the assaults began. The racists continued to be active throughout the area until 11 p.m.

Muslim residents explained to the WSWs how their homes and property were attacked. Most said that the assaults on their communities were directed by organised gangs but the police had tacitly backed the thugs.

In Ampitiya, Mohammad Ali said: “Once the thugs began attacking our home, we phoned the police with our last call at 9.02 p.m. The police received hundreds of similar calls and could have stopped the devastation. When our place was attacked the police jeep was passing by but it didn’t stop.” Mohammad’s three-wheeler taxi, which provides a living for his family, was torched by the thugs.

M. A. Haneer from Weliwitimodara said that his motor bicycle was also set on fire. He is still making monthly payments on the bike.

Another three-wheel driver, Mohammad Nishar, from Hiluru Mosque Road said: “We were informed in advance that an organised group was preparing for this attack but the STF [Special Task Force], which had been deployed here, was withdrawn at about 6 p.m. We’d been told to contact the police about any incidents but they didn’t act to prevent this in due time.”

Homes and properties were also looted at several

places and personal valuables taken. Goods worth 650,000 rupees were stolen from the Shoe and Shoe shop in Gintota.

Sri Lanka President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe immediately seized on the incident to mobilise the police, STF officers, as well as army and navy personnel to “maintain peace” in the area. The air force was also placed on standby.

As with previous racist attacks, the mobilisation of these forces has nothing to do with stopping the violence. In fact, Sinhala extremist groups operate with police and armed forces support.

Police media spokesperson, Superintendent of Police Ruwan Gunasekera, declared that action would be taken “against those who spread this false propaganda.” But Gunasekera’s threats will be the basis for a crackdown on government opponents and to intensify its attacks on social conditions and basic democratic rights of working people and the oppressed masses.

The Sri Lankan inspector general of police toured the area, promising investigations and action against those responsible. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, Law and Order Minister Sagala Ratnayake and several ministers from Galle also visited, calling on residents to “live in peace.” Wickremesinghe claimed the government would prevent future racist attacks and promised that the victims would be paid full compensation for the damage to their property.

These promises are worthless. The Sinhala-Buddhist racialist groups and associated gangs are operating under the patronage of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, just as they did during former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s rule.

The police claim that 19 people have been arrested over the rampage in the Gintota area. Prosecutions, however, will be limited to a few of those directly involved, leaving those who politically organised the assaults off the hook.

Between April and June, Muslim-owned shops, houses and mosques were attacked throughout Sri Lanka. The Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force or BBS) was accused of perpetrating those violent incidents.

The BBS, which emerged about six years ago with the blessing of Rajapakse, is being courted by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government. In June 2014, the BBS and other Sinhala chauvinist groups unleashed

anti-Muslim violence in Aluthgama, about 50 kilometres south of Colombo. Three Muslims were killed, scores were assaulted and extensive damage caused to houses and shops.

Like its predecessor, the current government, which faces a growing wave of strikes and protests, depends on the BBS and other extreme right elements, such as Sihala Ravaya (Echo of Sinhalese) and Ravana Balakaya (Brigade of Ravana) to divide working people. The government also calculates that these formations can be used in the future as fascistic shock troops against the working class.



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