

Colombo court detains Sri Lankan defence chief over civil war crimes

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Sri Lankan chief of defence staff, Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne, was arrested on Wednesday and placed in remand until December 5 by a Colombo Fort court.

Wijegunaratne, who had evaded arrest since September, has been charged with harbouring a senior navy officer, Lieutenant Commodore Chandana Prasad Hettiarachchi, who is accused of abducting 11 Tamil youth in 2008–2009. Hettiarachchi is believed to have led navy personnel who kidnapped individuals and demanded ransoms during the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The Colombo Fort magistrate said the military chief had to be denied bail because he could influence witnesses or disrupt ongoing investigations into the Tamil youth abduction case. The magistrate ordered special protection for Wijegunaratne whilst in custody.

The high-profile case covers just one of the numerous war crimes committed by the military during the nearly three-decade civil war. Consecutive presidents and prime ministers have provided legal protection to senior military officials since the war ended in May 2009.

The youth and students—Kasthuriarachchilage John Reed, Rajiv Naganathan, Pradeep Vishvanathan, Thilakeshwaram Nagalingam, Mohamed Saajith, Jamaldeen Dilan, Amanon Lyon, Roshan Lyon, Antony Kasturiarachchi, Thiagarajha Jegan and Mohamed Anver—were abducted in Colombo and nearby areas. The kidnappers demanded ransom payments from their relatively wealthy families.

According to reports, the youth were held at the Naval Prison in Colombo and later seen in underground cells at the Trincomalee Naval base. Although families paid ransoms, the youth have not been heard of since their abductions.

Hettiarachchi and Sampath Munasinghe, who was a

private assistant to former navy commander, Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda, and 10 other navy officers have been arrested as suspects in the case, which has dragged for nearly a decade. Hettiarachchi has also been accused of killing Tamil parliamentarian Nadarajah Raviraj in Colombo in November 2006.

Commenting on the defence chief's arrest, Jamaldeen Jennifer Weerasinghe, 58, the mother of one of the abducted youth, told the *Hindu*: "I am happy today." She was "hopeful that those who took our children away will be brought to justice." Weerasinghe added that if the admiral was innocent, "Why did he evade arrest? If he doesn't have anything to hide, why must he run away from the courts?"

Weerasinghe, married to a retired army officer, said that if her son were alive, he would be 34. "The navy must surely know what happened to our children," she said. But like all other war crime allegations against military officers, those accused in the current case will ultimately go scot-free, or one or two scapegoats will be found to blame.

Nadarajah Wimalaswaran, a member of the Socialist Equality Party, and his friend, Sivanathan Mathivathanan disappeared in March 2007 at Kayts in the navy-controlled Velani area. An SEP investigation and campaign proved that the navy was responsible for their disappearance.

Upon hearing of the military chief's arrest, Wimalaswaran's wife Sivajini told the WSW: "I think that my husband and his friend were arrested by the navy. I heard that some forces were arrested for other such cases, but we don't know what happened to the disappeared persons, including Wimalaswaran... My son lost his father—we cannot amend his expectations."

She added: "We have been living in a small hut and

are poor. Many families that lost the head of their households during the war are living in poverty. This situation was created by governments in Colombo.”

As soon as news emerged that police were about to arrest Wijegunaratne, President Maithripala Sirisena moved to protect him and other military officers.

At an August 28 meeting with military officers and the law and order and defence ministry secretaries, Sirisena ordered the police not to provide courts any “internal information” on cases related to military officers. While Sirisena claimed the information could threaten “national security,” the real purpose of his directive was to see the cases dismissed due to a lack of evidence.

Sirisena told an emergency cabinet meeting on September 12 that military leaders accused of crimes should not be arrested. Any inconvenience or harassment of the military and “war heroes” should be stopped, he said.

Two weeks ago, Wijegunaratne accused police Criminal Investigation Division investigator Nishantha Silva of having close connections with the LTTE. Silva’s immediate senior officer rejected this crude attempt to discredit the police case, citing the investigator’s actions against the Tamil separatist group.

Last week, Wijegunaratne was accused of confronting Lieutenant Commander Laksiri Galagamage, a key witness in the case. Galagamage told police that Wijegunaratne’s security team physically attacked and tried to shoot him.

The UN estimates that around 40,000 civilians were killed during final stages of the war that ended with the LTTE’s military defeat in May 2009. According to recent Missing Persons Office reports, at least 20,000 persons disappeared during the conflict.

Relatives and Tamil people in the North and East have held ongoing protests and demonstrations, demanding information about their abducted and “disappeared” loved ones.

Security forces are also accused of killing *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunga in January 2009, disappearing cartoonist and journalist Pragith Eknaligoda in 2010 and attacking several senior journalists.

Sirisena came to power in January 2015 by exploiting mass anger over the war atrocities and other attacks on

basic democratic rights and workers’ social conditions by former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government.

A regime-change operation was orchestrated by Washington and Ranil Wickremesinghe’s United National Party in order to bring Sri Lankan foreign policy into line with US preparations for war against China. The US and other major powers used the UN to threaten war crimes investigations against the military in order to pressure Rajapakse to break off relations with Beijing.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe won support from the Tamil National Alliance by pledging to bring justice to the Tamil war victims. They quickly ditched these promises and began encouraging Sinhala communalism to divide the working class.

The defence chief’s arrest is bound up with the factional power struggle gripping the ruling class amid new pressure from Washington and its allies, including India.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, who became prime minister in 2015, shifted Lanka’s foreign policy in favour of the US and India and built closer military relations. Facing mounting financial problems, however, they turned to Beijing, in particular selling Hambantota port to a Chinese company. Washington declared that Sri Lanka was getting caught in China’s “debt trap.”

Now the defence chief has been detained amid renewed hypocritical US expressions of concern about human rights violations in Sri Lanka, again designed to warn against any deviation toward China.

Last month, Sirisena instigated a constitutional coup, sacking Wickremesinghe and replacing him with Rajapakse. In the ongoing political crisis, the US has made clear it is backing the Wickremesinghe faction in order to maintain the anti-China shift.

Irrespective of what happens with Wijegunaratne’s trial and related cases, both warring factions of the ruling elite depend on support from the military, which was expanded and nurtured during the war and became a formidable factor in official politics.



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