

Sri Lankan president steps up military crackdown

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An all-party conference (APC) convened by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena on Thursday centred on strengthening an island-wide military-police crackdown in the wake of last Sunday's terrorist bombings.

Sirisena informed the meeting that he was going to "open a security operational centre" to co-ordinate all military operations.

According to the presidential media report, all party leaders attending the APC "extended [their] fullest support to the steps taken by the president to eradicate this threat of terrorism and to ensure national security, as well as to detain the suspects."

According to the brief report, the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna led by former president Mahinda Rajapakse, put forward 11 proposals, including strengthening the military intelligence wing.

The entire political establishment has seized on Sunday's terrible tragedy to ram through police-state measures in the name of fighting terrorism that will be used to suppress the emerging struggles of the working class.

All the parties present at the all-party conference bear responsibility for the draconian measures being put into force. These include the parties of the ruling coalition—Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the United National Party (UNP) of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), as well as two Muslim communal parties, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the All Island Muslim Congress.

Last Sunday's terrorist bombings targeted three prominent Christian churches and three high profile hotels. Without providing any explanation, officials

yesterday substantially revised the death toll down from over 350 to 253 men, women and children. Hundreds were injured, some critically.

Islamic State has claimed responsibility for the attack, but analysts have pointed out that no direct evidence has been provided. The government blames National Thowheeth Jamma'ath, an Islamic extremist group in Sri Lanka, for the massacre, but claims it had international connections.

The government and security agencies received a warning from a foreign intelligence agency with details of a possible attack on April 4. However, the warning was only sent to police officers on April 11, and then only to a few high-ranking police officers in charge of elite security.

The warning identified National Thowheeth Jamma'ath as preparing to carry out suicide attacks on prominent Christian churches. No-one has given an adequate explanation as to why no action was taken prior to the attack.

Instead the government is looking for scapegoats. On Wednesday, Defence Secretary Hemasiri Fernando resigned on the president's request. Sirisena has also asked Inspector General of Police Pujitha Jayasundara to resign.

On Wednesday, all the parliamentary parties backed the president's proclamation of emergency regulations giving sweeping powers to the military. These include the power to ban processions and meetings, prevent or restrict publications for creating disturbance to public order or disaffection, impose curfews, seize property, including vehicles, and maintain essential services.

The military and police now have the power to arrest persons without a warrant and detain them without trial for one year on the order of the defence secretary. Confessions, which in the past have included the use of

torture, can be used as evidence in court.

In an extraordinary move, Sirisena announced yesterday at a media conference that the army was carrying out a major search throughout the entire island. “Every household in the country will be checked. The lists of permanent residents of every house will be established to ensure no unknown persons could live anywhere.”

Army spokesman Brigadier Sumith Atapattu said that over 10,000 personnel have been deployed across the country. The air force has deployed over 1,000 soldiers for security duties while the navy has put its forces on active service. This is in addition to the deployment of 70,000 police, including its notorious special task force units.

This makes clear that the government and security forces are not simply targeting a small Muslim extremist group but the entire population. Sirisena justified the step by saying that similar methods had been used “during the fight against LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] terrorism.”

The three-decade communal war against the separatist LTTE was a culmination of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination which was used to suppress Tamils and divide the working class. Now the methods of that bloody and brutal war are revived in the name of “fighting terrorism.”

The government is whipping up anti-Muslim hysteria under conditions of a resurgence of working-class struggles. Asked if he would be “proscribing the Islamic militant groups responsible for terror attacks,” the president said that if they were proscribed under the state of emergency, the ban would lapse when it was lifted.

Sirisena said that he had asked for new legislation to be drafted to enable the permanent proscription of organisations. He added that officials were studying the laws of countries such as Singapore—a one-party police state—for a model to follow.

Sirisena also said the government was also taking the advice of foreign anti-terrorist experts. The US already has teams from the FBI and the military’s Indo-Pacific Command on the ground in Sri Lanka as “advisers” to local security forces. Washington is exploiting the tragedy to strengthen its military and political relations with Colombo, as it has been doing over the past four years, at the expense of Beijing.

Sirisena also made clear that the government is not about to lift the nationwide ban imposed on social media including Facebook and YouTube on April 21. He said any lifting of the ban was delayed “due to the lack of positive behaviour in the social media” without providing any information of what constituted negative behaviour.

Amid a deep political crisis in Colombo, every faction is clamouring for tough police-state measures.

Last October, Sirisena removed Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replaced him with his arch rival Rajapakse. Sirisena was compelled to reappoint Wickremesinghe as prime minister under pressure from the US after the country’s Supreme Court ruled his dissolution of parliament was unconstitutional.

The political infighting continues, however. Yesterday Sirisena blamed the UNP-led government for “weakening” military intelligence which he claimed to have opposed. For his part, Wickremesinghe accused the president did not inform the cabinet of the advance warning of the bombings.

Yesterday, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the brother of the former president Mahinda Rajapakse and the SLPP’s aspiring presidential candidate, said he would tackle “radical Islam.” He accused the government of not giving “priority to national security,” adding that there was too much talk of “human rights” and “individual freedoms.”

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who was defence secretary during the final phase of the war against the LTTE, is responsible for the killing of tens of thousands of civilians in the final army operations, as well as the military-aligned death squads that abducted and “disappeared” hundreds of Tamils and anti-government critics.

These comments are just one more sign that what is underway is the rapid imposition and strengthening of the war-time police-state apparatus in preparation to brutally crack down, not on terrorists, but on the mounting struggles of the working class and rural poor.



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