

COVID-19: Military steps up repression in war-ravaged northern Sri Lanka

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16 May 2020

Widespread and increasingly brutal attacks by the police and soldiers on Tamil civilians have been reported from the war-torn north of Sri Lanka in recent weeks.

President Gotabaya Rajapakse did not take effective measures to prevent COVID-19's spread in Sri Lanka from the outset. After delaying for weeks, he suddenly imposed a countrywide lockdown on March 20 without taking adequate steps to supply essentials and medicines for workers and poor. Rajapakse also gave full powers to the armed forces and the police to arrest people for "violating curfew."

These forces are particularly brutal in the northern and eastern provinces which are still under military occupation and de-facto military administration. Among the numerous attacks reported in the north are:

- On May 10, plainclothes police from Manipay entered a house in Chandilipayi village near Jaffna, seeking a young man living there without giving any reason. When informed that he was not at home, police attacked the family members. Police retreated when several youth confronted them, but came back with more officers and severely attacked people, breaking fences and walls around houses. Police turned back ambulances called to take injured persons away, arresting five youth.

- On May 9, several army soldiers entered Nagar Kovil village, asking about a former member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) militia. When people said there was no such person, police attacked young men and women in the vicinity. Angered by the unprovoked attack, villagers rushed to the scene, chasing soldiers away. One elderly woman injured in the assault was hospitalized.

- Several drunken policemen entered into a house at Mullivaikkal in Mullaithivu on May 6, inquiring about

a person. They severely assaulted three youth. Officers at the police station refused to take the victims' complaint. Police pressured the hospital authorities to discharge the injured before they recovered.

- A brutal police attack took place at Malikaithidal in the Kudaththanai area on May 1. The day before, police had come to the village and tried to seize a truck, saying it was used to illegally transport sand. Villagers denied the allegation and kept them from taking the truck. One person recorded video of police on his mobile phone. The next day, police returned with armed special task force officers, demanded the video and started attacking people. Police prevented three-wheel taxis from transporting the injured to hospital.

One widely-viewed video shows a small girl holding her fainted mother's head in her lap, saying that police kicked her mother's belly and assaulted her sister with a pole. Another woman said police attacked her backside with bats and dragged her by her hair. Many did not go to hospital for fear of reprisals.

About 90 families live in this village, where many people do manual work in farms or transporting sand to earn a meagre income. Many youth there have abandoned studies because of poverty.

People from different areas in the north have made nine complaints to the Jaffna human rights commission office about police and military harassment on the flimsy ground that they broke curfew. But poor people are compelled to leave their homes to find food, medicine and water because no plan has been implemented to provide those essentials.

Hundreds were arrested in the north using illegal curfew regulations and nearly 50,000 arrested on similar charges countrywide.

The stepped-up repression in the north and east reflect growing nervousness in the government and

among occupying military forces about growing unrest among workers and poor against the draconian living and social conditions under the lockdown.

People living in the north and east are victims of the nearly 30-year bloody communal war against the separatist LTTE. This final phase of the war—which ended in May 2009 with the murder of at least 40,000 civilians—was presided over by Mahinda Rajapakse, the brother of the current president, now serving as prime minister. Gotabhaya Rajapakse was defence secretary at the time. During the war, properties including houses were destroyed. Many still live in makeshift houses and dire living conditions.

The global economic collapse caused by the pandemic is hitting the north and east of Sri Lanka hard.

Ignoring the pandemic threat, President Rajapakse has reopened the economy, supporting big business and pushing workers back to work in unsafe conditions. Plants that are shut down—which are very few in this region or in Sri Lanka—have begun slashing jobs and wages and intensifying exploitation.

The Vaanavil factory near Kilinochchi opened recently with around 500 workers where 3,000 were employed earlier. Many small businesses and industries have not yet opened, however, and many workers are in desperate conditions.

Farmers cannot sell their produce, suffering heavy losses. Fishermen are left without income due to the suspension of exports and lack of access to deep-sea fishing. Government “relief” has reached few among the poor.

Before the pandemic, class struggles were developing in Sri Lanka since 2018, across ethnic lines, as workers in the north and east united with their class brothers and sisters in other parts of the country. There were many protests in the north demanding information about “missing persons” who disappeared during the war.

The Colombo government is nervous about growing social unrest and workers’ anger at being forced back to work in unsafe conditions, with job and wage cuts and increased working hours. The government has deployed thousands of soldiers, particularly to keep Colombo in a “wartime”-like situation, fearing mass struggles.

Indicating a preparation for a coup, Rajapakse has recalled large number of forces to Colombo. They are

now stationed in 16 schools. In the north, the military has been stationed in about 20 schools. An estimated 150,000 troops were in the occupied north in recent years.

The bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is silent on police-military repression on workers and poor. TNA leaders recently had a secret meeting with the Prime Minister and pledged their full support to the government. This strengthened the state’s determination to repress the masses in the north and east, paving the way for a presidential dictatorship.

Other Tamil nationalist groups like former chief minister C.V. Wigneswaran’s Tamil People’s National Alliance and Tamil National People’s Front use the deployment of military in schools as another occasion to whip up rabid Tamil communalism. They blame the Colombo government for seeking to use the northern schools as quarantine centres for soldiers in the north. However, Rajapakse recently deployed forces in schools throughout Sri Lanka.

All these parties, fearing developing struggles of Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala workers, are covering up the President’s dictatorial policies and trying to divide the working class on ethnic lines. Similarly, Rajapakse and his Sinhala-chauvinist backers are launching anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim campaigns.

A united struggle of the working class must be developed against Rajapakse’s moves towards a dictatorship. A key task in this struggle is the unconditional withdrawal of military from the north and east of Sri Lanka.

In this fight, workers must build action committees across ethnic and religious lines in workplaces, calling for support from rural poor and youth and reaching out to the international working class. Workers can defend the jobs, wages and democratic rights of all only in a fight for socialism. On this basis the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on the working class to fight for the program of a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of the struggles for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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