Eight protesting inmates demanding COVID-19 protection shot dead in Sri Lankan prison

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At least eight inmates were shot dead and over 70 injured on Sunday when security forces opened fire on a prisoners' protest at Mahara Prison, 15 kilometres from the capital Colombo.

Ten of those injured are in a critical condition at nearby Ragama Hospital, the hospital's deputy director told the media. Another 61 injured prisoners, he said, had tested positive for COVID-19 and were being treated in a special unit.

The protesting prisoners were demanding prison authorities provide proper protection from COVID-19, which is rapidly spreading through the Sri Lankan prison system. The inmates wanted to be transferred to coronavirus-free locations and given regular PCR tests.

Senaka Perera, a lawyer with the Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners, said the Mahara inmates were frustrated with the prison officials who had ignored their month-long call for coronavirus testing and the separation of infected prisoners.

As of yesterday, more than 1,098 COVID-19 infections and two deaths have been reported in Sri Lankan prisons this year. At least 198 infections are from the Mahara facility.

Prison guards, backed by hundreds of police special task force and riot squads deployed by the government, were mobilized on Sunday to suppress the protesting prisoners. While it is unclear whether the police were involved in the shootings, gunfire was still being heard early yesterday morning.

Prison officials said two guards had been taken hostage by the inmates. They were later rescued and admitted to the hospital with injuries. Authorities claim that a kitchen and medical store had been set on fire by the prisoners.

Family members and relatives, who are acutely aware of previous brutalities by guards and police against the inmates, remained outside the prison pleading for information. Later police dispersed them. Yesterday hundreds of relatives gathered outside Ragama Hospital, blaming authorities for the deaths and injuries at the prison.

The shootings at Mahara Prison are the latest in a series of government crackdowns on prisoners demanding COVID-19 protection and proper healthcare. On November 18, one inmate was shot dead during a provocation at Kandy's Bogambara Prison where 175 prisoners have been infected with the virus.

Protests have erupted in the past two weeks at prisons across the country, including Welikada, Magazine, Mahara, Bogambara, Boossa, Kuruwita, Angunukolapelassa and Negombo, as infections have spread throughout the island. Yesterday, several inmates began a rooftop protest at Negombo Prison demanding proper protection, testing and treatment.

The Rajapakse government responded to the killings at Mahara by seeking to blame "rioting prisoners," without mentioning any of the inmates' legitimate demands about COVID-19.

Addressing parliament yesterday, Prison Reform Minister Sudarshini Fernandopoulle attempted to justify the shooting of unarmed inmates, claiming that the guards had no choice but to open fire to prevent a break-out.

Fernandopoulle went on to ludicrously declare there was, "an invisible hand which activated suddenly and we are ready to conduct an independent probe to uncover who is behind the riot." The situation in Mahara, she insisted, was a part of "a trend of unrest."

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Parliamentary opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, who failed to condemn the violent attack on the prisoners, called on the government to appoint a committee to probe the "unrest."

Justice Minister Ali Sabry later announced a five-member committee headed by a retired high court judge to investigate. This committee, like all its previous government-appointed predecessors, will be used to deflect popular anger and suppress the truth.

Fernandopoulle's allegation about a "hidden hand" is a patent lie. Sri Lankan prisons are overcrowded with each facility containing more than three times the number of people it can accommodate and ripe for a massive spread of the virus.

Although the capacity of the Sri Lanka's 22 prisons is 12,000, there are currently more than 30,000 detainees, according to official government data. About 20,000 are in custody on remand without bail, while a significant number have been convicted of minor offenses but unable to pay the fines.

Committee for the Protection of Prisoners Secretary Sudesh Nandimal told the media that prisoners were under severe pressure because of the lack of COVID-19 protection, inadequate food and medical supplies and harassment by prison officials. He alleged that when protests erupted at Mahara, prison officials launched a series of provocations and then allowed the killings to occur.

While the violent repression of prisoners in these facilities is not new it has been increasing in recent months. Two inmates were killed and six more injured in March this year when guards opened fire during unrest at Anuradhapura Prison in Sri Lanka's North Central Province.

At the same time, the infamous pretext used by police of "shooting while attempting to flee" to justify the killing of remanded prisoners or those in custody, is on the rise.

One recent alleged example was the death last May at Mahara Prison of a young inmate. Police said he died in an accident while trying to escape but relatives later claimed he had been brutally beaten and tortured by prison officials. No proper inquiry has been held.

In line with rising public criticism of these repressive actions, the toothless Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka has drawn attention to the increased number of individuals who have died in detention during President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's administration. The commission has written to the Inspector General of Police, stating that eight such extra-judicial killings have taken place since last June.

The Mahara Prison killings are not an aberration but point to the repressive environment deliberately created by the Rajapakse government as COVID-19 spreads through the island. As of yesterday, the country's COVID-19 cases climbed to over 26,000 cases and the death toll rose to 118.

On November 17, Rajapakse imposed an Essential Services Order on the country's 15,000 port workers who were raising concerns about having to work amid rising workplace infection rates. Three days before the Mahara prison attack President Rajapakse appointed retired Admiral Sarath Weerasekara as the new cabinet minister for public security.

Workers and the oppressed masses must regard the bloody repression at Mahara Prison as a warning about the dictatorial preparations being made by the Rajapakse regime to suppress social unrest more broadly.

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