

Sri Lankan government activates lie machine to cover up prison killings

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4 December 2020

The Rajapakse government has responded to popular anger over last Sunday's cold-blooded killing of inmates at Mahara Prison with crude lies to try to cover up the massacre. Heavily-armed prison guards assisted by Police Special Task Force (STF) officers opened fire on protesting prisoners, who were demanding protection from COVID-19, which is spreading rapidly through the prison system.

The number of prisoners killed has risen by three since Sunday, taking the official death toll to 11. According to hospital sources, 117 people are still being treated, with several in critical conditions.

The Rajapakse government has stepped up its repression, deploying 200 STF soldiers and 600 policemen inside and outside the prison, 15 kilometres from Colombo. On Monday evening, two helicopters carrying gunmen circled over the prison in an attempt to intimidate inmates and on Wednesday prison guards and STF officers cracked down as tensions mounted inside the facility.

Prison Reform Minister Sudarshini Fernandopolle set the tone for the government's lie machine, telling parliament the incident was caused by an "invisible hand which activated suddenly." She claimed that the guards had no choice but to open fire in order to prevent a breakout.

Industries Minister Wimal Weerawansa claimed that a pill used to treat mental illnesses, but which produced violence and a desire to see blood when used by normal people, had been given to prisoners by a drug dealer inside the facility.

Deputy Inspector General of Police Ajith Rohana told a press conference that some 21,000 psychiatric pills were stored in the Mahara prison's infirmary. He said police would investigate why such a large number had been ordered and claimed that heroin addicts used the pills as alternative drugs.

Likewise, Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella argued that the inmates could have been under the influence of unnamed psychiatric pills. He said measures by intelligence operatives and prison officials to prevent drugs getting into the prison appeared to have been circumvented.

A December 2 press release by the Sri Lanka College of

Psychiatrists (SLCP) debunked these assertions. The claimed connection "between the violent and aggressive behaviour of prisoners and the abuse of the drugs used in psychiatric practice," was "without any rational basis... None of these drugs are responsible for violent or aggressive behaviour and, in fact, many of these drugs promote calmness."

Industries Minister Weerawansa also alleged that the prison protest was staged to discredit President Rajapakse. "This is a carefully executed attempt to show that when Gotabaya Rajapakse was defence secretary this happened and now that he is president the same thing is happening and is bringing him into international disrepute," he declared.

These claims are laughable. Rajapakse, as defence secretary, and his brother, then-President Mahinda Rajapakse, are infamous for the war crimes carried out against the separatist Liberation Tigers and Tamil Eelam as well as civilians, and subsequent attacks on democratic rights. These included the kidnapping and killing of political opponents and journalists, as well as a similar prison massacre.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse was defence secretary when the following killings occurred.

- According to UN estimates, 40,000 Tamils were killed in the final months of the civil war that ended in May 2009.

- In December 2012, STF officers killed 27 inmates at Welikada prison after provoking a clash during a search of the facility.

- In May 2011, police shot dead a worker during a protest by Katunayake Free Trade Zone workers against the government's contributory pension scheme.

- In 2012, police killed a protesting fisherman during a demonstration in Chilaw over higher fuel prices.

- In 2013, security forces shot dead three people at a protest demanding clean water in Rathupaswela, Gampaha.

In an attempt to deflect from the reality that Mahara inmates were demanding protection from COVID-19, Media Minister Rambukwella claimed there was no similarity with prison riots in countries like Italy where inmates have demonstrated over the lack of COVID-19 safety measures.

Sri Lankan prisons, which are holding approximately three times the number inmates they should, are coronavirus hotbeds. Over 1,100 COVID-19 infections have been reported from the prison system, more than 200 of them in the Mahara facility. More than half of the 117 injured in Sunday's incident have tested positive.

Anger over the prison killings has been expressed on social media and human rights organisations held a press briefing to condemn the government's actions. Court cases have been filed against the authorities over the deaths.

The International Commission of Jurists said the events were a consequence of the failure of the authorities to effectively address prison conditions. Amnesty International said: "Prison authorities must ensure an end to the use of unlawful and excessive force against prisoners agitating against their detention conditions during the outbreak of COVID-19."

The Rajapakse government is attempting to suppress protests. The police obtained a court injunction banning a protest organised by the Committee for the Protecting Rights of Prisoners outside Welikada Prison (also known as the Magazine Prison) in Colombo.

Under the guise of investigations by the Police Criminal Investigation Department and the Prisons Department, the government is subjecting the inmates to surveillance and interrogation.

Corporate media outlets have endorsed Colombo's repressive response. A December 1 editorial in the right-wing *Divaina* newspaper warned the government about unrest spreading to other prisons. "The onset of most eruptions can be slow but the end result can be devastating, so proper mechanisms must be put in place to control this situation."

Justice Minister Ali Sabri has established a five-member panel headed by a retired judge to investigate the prison incident. But as the historical record demonstrates, all such official investigations cover up the real reasons for incidents and justify the security forces' violent actions.

Committee for the Protection of Prisoners president Senaka Perera told the WSWs the government had already taken steps to remove evidence and protect the shooters.

Perera said the government was attempting to cremate nine of the eleven people who were killed, invoking COVID-19

regulations and claiming they were infected with the virus, thus leaving no evidence for investigation. The committee has filed a petition against the authorities, saying they have violated basic criminal law.

Observations made by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) following a visit to Mahara prison shed some light on the real conditions inside the facility. HRCSL commissioner Ramani Muttettuwegama told the BBC that remand prisoners selected 12 people to present their views to the commission.

Muttettuwegama said fear of COVID-19 was the reason for inmates' protests. "All things considered, overcrowding is the biggest problem. I have been to many places like that but I have never seen such congestion anywhere... The capacity of the Mahara remand prison is 1,000, but there are 2,500 in it."

The HRCSL commissioner complained that although the Rajapakse government took some measures to reduce the prison population by 30 percent by the end of April in response to the epidemic, following requests from HRCSL and various activists, it changed its mind in September.

Pointing to the disregard of authorities toward prisoners' health and safety, she said: "Prison authorities said bluntly—no PCR [tests] to those who were there, no PCR to those who came in."

Referring to last Sunday's incident, she added: "Some detainees mentioned that inmates were shot at from the guard towers. We still do not know if that is true, so we are waiting for the post-mortem report."

Under these conditions, the government's attempt to cremate the bodies is suspected of being a move to destroy evidence.

In another indication of tightening repression in all prisons, on December 1, Rajapakse removed Fernandopulle as prison reforms minister. Her replacement, Lohan Ratwatte, was convicted of the murder of ten people during general elections in 2001 but acquitted on appeal.

The Mahara shootings and the government's response are inseparable from Rajapakse's moves toward dictatorial forms of rule to suppress growing opposition by the working class and the oppressed masses against austerity measures and the social disaster intensified by the pandemic.



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