Sri Lanka prison massacre autopsy confirms victims were shot

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Postmortem reports have revealed that the deaths of inmates, during a protest on November 29 and 30 at Sri Lanka's Mahara Prison, were caused by gunshot injuries.

The government deployed heavily-armed prison guards and special task force police officers to suppress a protest by thousands of prisoners, who were demanding PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests, as hundreds of inmates had already tested positive.

Eleven prisoners died during this incident and more than 100 were injured. So far, two postmortem reports have been submitted, which revealed that 8 out of 11 had gunshot wounds. Reports on three others are due to be submitted on January 8 before a local magistrate.

However, a leaked report of the committee appointed by the justice minister to investigate the incident, quoted in last weekend's *Sunday Times*, has noted that all 11 inmates died from gunshot injuries. This report is to be submitted to the cabinet today.

Athula Kumara, a young remand prisoner, whose release had been authorized by the courts, was among the dead. He was caught in the gunfire because prison and police officers had delayed his release.

The authorities sought to cremate the bodies immediately, declaring that they had been infected by the coronavirus and, if kept, would constitute a health threat. Lawyers appearing for the victims accused the authorities of seeking to destroy evidence. Amid public outrage, the government was compelled to appoint a five-member committee to oversee the autopsies.

The relatives of the Mahara prisoners have expressed fears that more deaths could have occurred. Some of them have lodged complaints with the Sri Lanka Human Right Commission (SLHRC)—a toothless government body—concerning inmates that have been missing since the incident.

A mother of a prisoner told the media that her son had disappeared and the prison officers refused to reveal where he was. "I have come every second day and made calls daily concerning the whereabouts of my son, but they have declared "he is not there."

The government and the police have blamed the casualties on rival inmates attacking each other. State Minister of Prison Reforms and Rehabilitation Lohan Ratwatte told the parliament that "no one has been killed by shootings carried out by prison officers," insisting that "this has been confirmed by the postmortems." Ratwatte made this statement before any proper postmortems had been carried out.

Minister of Industries Wimal Weerawansa told parliament that the incidents in Mahara prison were "an attempt to discredit the rule of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse." The clashes, he claimed, were a result of prisoners consuming a drug called "reverse" that was being circulated by an organised group of inmates.

A Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists statement refuted this, pointing out that the drugs were circulated to create a calm environment, including drowsiness among the inmates.

The Rajapakse government's lies, backed by the media, have been punctured by the postmortem reports.

The justice minister appointed a committee, headed by a retired high court judge. In the past, such committees have produced reports that suppress the truth and justify the government's actions. In this case, however, the overwhelming evidence could not be swept under the carpet.

The committee's interim report admitted that the inmates' campaign advanced reasonable demands, including the immediate release of all those inmates who had been granted bail, PCR tests for all inmates, the removal of COVID-19 patients from Mahara Prison

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and the provision of edible food.

According to the report, inmates were angered and fearful of becoming infected once it became known that there were 186 new confirmed COVID-19 cases, including six prison officers.

The prison officers "used tear gas along with rubber bullets and live ammunition in order to disperse the rebellious inmates."

The report claimed that there were quarrels among the several groups of inmates, who used "wood clubs, iron rods, large knives and swords." However, it would not say how the weapons got into the prison.

During the protest, prison officers disconnected the water supply. The report pointed out that, when the prisoners began protesting and demanding water, "the officers fired shots to control the aggressive group."

The Mahara killing is the third such incident this year. Two prisoners were killed and several others injured in Anuradhapura prison in North Central Province, following a protest related to COVID-19 in March. Another prisoner was shot dead on November 18 at Bogambara Prison in Central Province, supposedly trying to escape after more than 100 inmates had tested positive.

When the Mahara incident took place, there were 2,782 inmates in the prison, nearly three times its capacity.

According to information supplied by the prison department, Sri Lanka's prison capacity is 11,762, despite the fact that there were 33,472 prisoners by December last year, an overcapacity of 184.6 percent.

Due to the government's disregard for the difficult and unsafe conditions inmates face, more than 3,000 have so far tested positive. The majority of these prisoners are young people addicted to drugs—one of the terrible social products of the worsening crisis of capitalism.

Research compiled by the SLHRC following the Mahara massacre referred to the tragic conditions created by overcrowding, insufficient water and sanitary facilities, and inedible food.

According to this study, the lack of space in the prison has forced inmates to organize shifts to stand and sleep, and to excrete into buckets and polythene bags at night due to the lack of enough toilets. One inmate told the researchers: "We need to change this place, which smells like death; it smells like a graveyard. We must change this."

After the incident, President Rajapakse took measures to tighten the repressive conditions in the country's prisons. He appointed a presidential task force in order to "modernise" the prison system, using the experiences and technologies of foreign countries like China.

The government has also decided to establish a special riot control unit in the prisons. Commissioner General of Prisons Thushara Upuldeniya told *newsfir st .lk* that "500 Sri Lankan army personnel who have completed 12 years' service and left the military will be recruited for this unit, as per the directive issued by the President."

The special unit will be used for "the protection of high-profile prisoners and to combat riots inside prisons, and the special unit will be linked to Prison Intelligence."

These measures are part of Rajapakse's moves to militarise his administration as he moves towards the establishment of a presidential dictatorship.

The capitalist class is ruthlessly imposing the burden of the economic collapse and the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic onto the masses, resulting in rising anger among Sri Lankan workers and the poor. Nervous about the eruption of a social explosion, the Rajapakse regime is preparing for class war.

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