

# One killed, two dozen injured as Sri Lankan police fire on protestors

Our reporters  
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Sri Lankan police yesterday shot dead one person and injured about 27, some critically, in an attack on a protest of thousands against the latest fuel price increase in Rambukkana, 95 kilometres northeast of Colombo.

A wave of demonstrations and protests erupted across the country in almost every city opposing the petrol and diesel price hikes by Lanka-India Oil Company and the state-owned Petroleum Corporation on Sunday and Monday, respectively.

An eyewitness to yesterday's brutal police attack told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the dead person was 40-year-old Chaminda Lakshan, a father of two living in Narambedda village near Rambukkana. He used his lorry to supply fodder to the tamed elephants kept at the houses of the wealthy.

As in other areas, thousands of people had been waiting in queues at the Rambukkana fuel distribution station for the last three days, without getting petrol or diesel. On Monday night, a petrol tanker arrived at the fuel station. When distribution began yesterday, people demanded fuel at the previous price because they had been there for days.

When that was refused, people began protesting by blocking highways and the railway line. Police were heavily mobilised from Rambukkana and nearby police stations. At noon the situation became extremely tense. When people refused to move, police attacked by firing tear gas. Suddenly, without warning, police started firing live rounds into the crowd.

Video footage cited by the *Guardian* showed "a senior officer instructing others dressed in full riot gear: 'Fire, fire and chase them out.'"

The injured were taken to the Rambukkana and Kegalle hospitals. Lakshan died in the Kegalle hospital. Five critically injured persons are also being treated in

the same hospital.

In the evening, police declared an indefinite curfew in the Rambukkana police area. People have been told to avoid travelling through the area. Police have also mobilised Special Task Force units, which are notorious for their brutality. Police claimed that they opened fire after being pelted by rocks.

The immediate reason for yesterday's protest is the latest fuel price hike. However, hundreds of thousands of working people have now been protesting in the streets for more than two weeks demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

About 10,000 protesters are gathered at Galle Face Green in central Colombo raising the slogan "Gota go home." People are angered by spiralling inflation, shortages of essentials including food, medicine and fuel, and protracted power outages every day.

Protests have also taken place in Rambukkana in recent days under the same slogan.

The violent police attack on the protest in Rambukkana occurred without warning, a deliberate attempt to intimidate protesters more broadly. The decision to fire on the crowd, which had been blocking the rail line for hours, would only have been made at top levels.

The government is confronting an unprecedented economic political and social crisis for which it has no answers other than to impose new burdens on working people. The Central Bank has declared a temporary default on foreign loans and a Sri Lankan delegation is currently in Washington to beg for emergency assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The Rajapakse regime is desperate to end the protest movement so as to claim that it has the situation under control. In a speech to his newly appointed cabinet,

President Rajapakse issued a thinly veiled warning, calling on protesters not to “allow opportunists to turn the protest into rioting.”

The protests, however, are being driven by rapidly deteriorating conditions that are making it increasingly difficult for workers and the poor to put food on the table and survive.

With this week’s increases, petrol prices have been increased by 91 percent this year alone, while diesel has increased by 139 percent. This is a direct result of the Ukraine war that has driven up oil prices internationally.

The huge rise in fuel prices has a chain effect, pushing up the cost of transport and many other items. Yesterday, the government gave the green light for a 35 percent increase in bus fares. It is also continuing extensive daily power cuts, as it is unable to pay for the diesel needed for thermal power generation.

Yesterday, the island’s main wheat flour producing company announced a 40-rupee increase in the price of a kilogram of flour. Immediately, bakery owners increased the price of a 400-gram loaf of bread by 30 rupees and hiked up the price of their other products as well.

The situation facing working people will only worsen as any deal struck with the IMF will inevitably come with draconian austerity measures. The IMF has already laid out in general terms what it will demand for a bailout loan, including deep cuts to the budget deficit, the restructuring of state-owned enterprises and increases to value-added taxes, which will hit the poorest sections of the population the hardest.

These measures will translate into massive cuts to public sector jobs, wages and pensions, the privatisation or commercialisation of state-owned corporations, the elimination of social programs, and further deep inroads into what remains of free public education and health care.

This austerity agenda cannot be imposed democratically and will meet with determined resistance from working people.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) unequivocally condemns yesterday’s brutal attack on Rambukkana protesters. It is a warning sign of what the government is preparing behind the scenes—the use of the military and police to violently suppress the protest movement.

The SEP defends the right of working people to fight

for their essential needs—in this case, to be able to buy fuel at reasonable prices to carry out their daily activities. If the government and corporations are incapable, the working class should take over production and distribution to ensure that fuel, food, medicines and other basic items are available for all.

The SEP urges the formation of democratically elected action committees in factories, workplaces and working class suburbs. These need to be independent of the trade unions and opposition parties, which defend the profit system that serves the needs of the wealthy at the expense of workers, farmers, youth and the poor.

The SEP has advanced a socialist program of action for the working class to fight for its democratic and social rights.



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