

Brother of victim of 2011 police shooting comments on latest police killing in Sri Lanka

Tom Peters
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On April 19, Sri Lankan police opened fire on protesters in Rambukkana who were demonstrating against the soaring cost of fuel. One worker, Chaminda Lakshan, was killed and dozens more injured.

The deadly attack, which has been defended by the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, provoked outrage among working people. The Rambukkana protest was part of the ongoing anti-government demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of people that have swept across the island for more than two weeks.

The struggles are a response to spiralling inflation, shortages of essentials, including food, medicine and fuel, and extended daily power outages—the result of the government’s policy of imposing the severe economic crisis on the backs of the working class.

Following the bloody crackdown, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Madushan Rathnasekara, whose brother Roshen was shot dead by police in May 2011. Roshen, a worker in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ), was killed at the age of just 21 while taking part in protests against a plan to cut pension entitlements and loot the pension scheme. More than 200 others were injured.

Roshen’s family has circulated an image on social media highlighting the similarity of the shootings with the words: “History Repeats.” Madushan observed that the same family ruled Sri Lanka at the time of Roshen’s death, with Mahinda Rajapakse serving as President (he is now Prime Minister, and his brother Gotabaya is President).

He warned, based on his own family’s experience, that Chaminda Lakshan’s family cannot have any confidence in the so-called “impartial investigation” announced by the government into the events in Rambukkana.

“The police never do an investigation against the police. They won’t do that,” Madushan said, adding: “I don’t believe the family will get justice as long as the Rajapakses govern the country. The court case won’t

progress. The same happened to us. The Sri Lankan judicial system is corrupted, it’s not independent.”

Both the Rajapakses (President and PM) feigned sympathy over the killing at Rambukkana, while also implying that the protesters were to blame for the violence. Gotabaya wrote on Twitter: “I urge all citizens to refrain from violence as they protest.”

Madushan pointed out that there is “clear evidence” in video footage that “the people were unarmed, they had no guns, nothing, not even stones. Everything was done by the police.”

Following the 2011 shooting, there were similar promises of an investigation, but what resulted was a cover-up. “In our incident, the [authorities] took all camera footage and mobile phones belonging to the workers to hide the incident, even from the media,” Madushan explained.

Retired judge Mahanama Thilakaratne was appointed to carry out an investigation. After his findings were submitted to the government, Roshen’s family and supporters had to fight for nearly five years before they were made public. The report recommended that police officers involved in the FTZ shooting be prosecuted, but this has not happened, more than a decade after the event.

Madushan believed that the decision to fire on protesters was not made by individual police officers, either in 2011 or 2022, but was a political decision. He said the government was trying to provoke violence, explaining: “The police or army can’t get involved against the protest because it’s peaceful. The government wants to create something bad, a terrible thing, so then the police or army can get involved and dissolve the protest. That’s what the government wants.”

Madushan, who currently lives in New Zealand, joined the recent protests organised by Sri Lankans around the world in solidarity with the movement against the Rajapakse government.

He explained the desperate conditions facing the majority of people on the island: “They don’t have 59 medicines, there is not enough equipment for surgeries, not enough food, nothing. In 2019, one litre of petrol was 117 rupees. Now it’s three times that: 360 rupees. All politicians are rich, but the common people all are poor.”

The Rambukkana protest was triggered by an overnight increase in the price of petrol, which is in very short supply. This decision, Madushan pointed out, was made by the state, which owns most of the petrol stations. Workers who had been waiting all night for fuel to be delivered to the local station were outraged when they were told they would be charged the new price.

The main demand of the protests is for the resignation of the Rajapakse government, which continues to cling to power. Madushan said, “they want to stay because they are corrupt,” and because the Rajapakses are afraid of being prosecuted for numerous crimes. “When they are in power, they are safe, after that they have to face the courts,” he said.

Madushan also pointed to the murder of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge in 2009, which was part of a wave of killings of journalists. Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who was then the defence secretary, had filed a defamation case against Wickrematunge because of the latter’s allegations of corruption within the military during the country’s civil war.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, while supporting the protesters’ demand for the removal of the current government, is fighting to mobilise the working class against all the capitalist parties. The SEP advances a revolutionary program to resolve the present crisis in the interests of the working class—not the business elite in Sri Lanka and internationally.



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