Thousands pay their respects to Chaminda Lakshan, killed by Sri Lankan police during mass protests

Our correspondent
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On Saturday over 500 people attended the funeral of Chaminda Lakshan who was shot and killed by Sri Lankan police during a mass protest in Rambukkana, about 95 kilometres north-east of Colombo, last Tuesday. The funeral was held at Naranbedda Hiriwadunna in Rambukkana, near Karandagasthanne, Lakshan's home village.

Lakshan was the sole breadwinner in his family, which includes his wife Priyanganee, daughter Piyumi Upeksha, son Thanusha and his mother-in-law. Thousands of outraged people from the area have visited his home after his body was brought there from Kegalle hospital on Friday.

Forty-year-old Lakshan was shot dead by the police who opened fire on unarmed people in Rambukkana protesting delays in petrol deliveries and sharp price rises in petrol and diesel announced the previous day. The police brutally responded to protesters who were blocking the main highways and a railway line. The police first attacked in the afternoon with tear gas and then suddenly, without any warning, opened fire with live ammunition.

The Rambukkana protest is part of ongoing demonstrations across the country involving hundreds of thousands of working people demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. The mass protests, which have continued for about three weeks, erupted over spiralling inflation, shortages of all essentials including food, medicine, fuel, and daily power cuts.

The day after the police shooting President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his elder brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, issued Twitter messages blaming protesters for the violence and justifying the vicious police attack.

President Rajapakse then ordered the deployment of armed army, navy and air force personnel into Rambukkana and adjacent police areas from April 21 to 23 which, he claimed, was necessary to assist the police "maintain law and order." Though not openly visible, the military are on standby at several nearby locations, ready for immediate mobilisation. Rajapakse's deployment of the military is an outrageous attempt to intimidate people in the area and throughout the country.

Priyanganee, Lakshan's wife, explained to the WSWS that she was told that her husband had been shot and injured and taken to the Kegalle hospital. She quickly travelled there but could not find him and so returned home, learning only later that her husband had died.

"The night of the day that the incident happened about 20 armed soldiers came here. I asked why they'd come [to our home]? They said they wanted to help me and provide food. They set up tents. But later, I realised that I did not want their support and that this could be some sort of plan to provide certain things in order to suppress this case," she said.

"The next day I told them to leave and then they left. They'd come from the Beragala army camp [located near Kegalle]. I do not want this [kind of killing] to happen again [in this country]," she said.

She said she went to the courts for a magisterial inquiry on April 21 and that 107 lawyers appeared on her behalf.

Karandagasthanne is a poor village with about 50 families. Most of the homes have just two or three small rooms, a veranda and a kitchen. The villagers

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were given a half-acre land in 1981 by the government. Residents are mainly small farmers, day workers doing odd jobs and some public sector workers. Most of the village youth are unemployed. The nearest hospitals are at Rambukkana and Kegalle hospitals, 5 and 10 kilometres away respectively, and the closest primary school is at Halpitiya, a nearby village.

Eranda Chinthaka told the WSWS that the fuel station management had refused to provide fuel to people at the previous day's price even though they had been queueing overnight. He had been in line outside the fuel station trying to obtain fuel for his van on the day the police opened fire.

"The government has no concern for the people," he said. "People blocked the roads and so higher police officers might have planned some measures to break it. The riot police were brought in, numbering over 500, but our crowd did nothing. Suddenly the police started attacking with tear gas. This happened at around 4.30–5.00 in the evening. After seeing blood our crowd panicked and got angry and also threw stones. Then they [the police] continued to shoot, injuring about 20."

Chinthaka, who is 40-years-old and lives in Kiriwallapitiya, previously worked as a tour guide. He lost his job after the COVID-19 pandemic led to a collapse of the country's tourist industry. He now earns a living by driving a hire van. The people in his village depend on paddy cultivation, he said, and have been drastically impacted by the Rajapakse government's ban on imported fertilisers. The government has destroyed villagers' livelihood, he added.

Indrani Swarnalatha, 57, who lives in Gabbala village at Rambukkana, witnessed the police crackdown on protesters last Tuesday. She came to Rambukkana city that morning after hearing about the demonstration.

"We were chanting slogans demanding fuel prices be reduced and for the provision of fuel at the previous price. In the evening, while we were protesting, a bright light suddenly appeared and something like a fog came. It was tear gas. It also affected my eyes, and I ran away with others. This was about 5 o'clock in the evening. I washed my eyes and came back again," Indrani said.

"Suddenly shooting began and then further shooting sounds were heard. I saw four injured people brought and put into a vehicle. There were no other vehicles to carry another injured person and so he was transported on a motorcycle.

"People were not damaging anything. A fuel tanker was there but people said there should not be any damage to it. If there'd been damage it would have affected the driver who is also a poor man," she said.

Indrani has two children, one of whom is married. Her husband is dead and so she does casual work to earn a living. Explaining her hardships, she said, "Now there is less work and so it's difficult to live. I earn 1,000 rupees a day but my house is not in good condition. I do not receive the Samurdhi fund [a government welfare program for the poor]."

An official magisterial inquiry has begun into the police shooting of protesters and Lakshan's death. Testifying to the inquiry, Senior Police Superintendent Keerthiratne said he instructed police officers to shoot into the air if the situation became uncontrollable. He claimed that the unrest intensified and that after protesters attempted to set fire to the oil tanker, he ordered police officers to open fire, but aiming under knee level. He did not explain how all of those injured had wounds above the knees.

The Sri Lanka Bar Association (SLBA) has written to the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Chandana Wickremaratne, the Human Rights Commission and the National Authority for the Protection of Victims of Crimes and Witnesses, complaining that the injured civilians at Kegalle hospitals and other witnesses are afraid of being intimidated by police officers. The SLBA has called on all these institutions to intervene and defend the witnesses.

The government and the police have appointed various committees to investigate the Rambukkana police shooting. President Rajapakse and his brother the prime minister have already justified the police violence and blamed the protesters. As the political and economic crisis deepens, they will step up the police attacks and state repression.

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