

Sri Lankan government launches a massive security operation in Colombo

W.A.Sunil
16 May 2023

Last Friday, President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government suddenly activated a major security operation around Colombo University and in several other areas, including Colombo Fort, Galle Face Green and roads leading to the Capital.

Thousands of armed soldiers and police special task force and riot police personnel equipped with water cannons were deployed to these areas and road barricades established. Hundreds of police were brought into Colombo from outlying areas for the operation. Troops were mobilised in Colombo's outer suburbs while police checked motorists outside the city.

The massive mobilisation, according to media reports, was in response to "intelligence" information, but according to *Economynext*, the information consisted of an "unusually large lunch order" received by a Colombo University canteen.

The news outlet quoted one source who said: "Intelligence units had picked up information that the canteen had received an order for 1,500 lunch packets on Friday... This was (mis)interpreted as a mass gathering to march to government buildings."

The article reported that about 500 first-year students had been invited to an arts department celebration at the university and that lunch was to be served to them and their parents or siblings attending the event.

According to the same source, the president's private residence in Colombo was also provided additional security. Wickremesinghe, however, has not lived there since it was set on fire in May last year.

Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Nihal Thalduwa told the media that the Friday's massive security operation followed "intelligence reports" about "an anti-government group planning to create disturbances" and emphasised that "security measures

will remain until further notice."

The *Daily Mirror.lk* quoted "highly placed security sources" who claimed "IUSF [Inter University Student Federation] students were planning to march into the city in their hundreds over the weekend to take over key government institutions and launch a fresh 'Aragalaya' (struggle) against the government."

Ministry of Defence Director (Media) Col. Nalin Herath told *Sunday Morning*: "Security in Colombo will be increased for the next few days, due to multiple reasons, including a planned rehearsal for various contingencies, such as natural disasters or terror attacks."

On Monday, the government ended its special military and police deployment but police spokesperson, SSP Thalduwa, declared that its "normal security program will remain."

Last weekend's security operation in Colombo had nothing to do with responding to "natural disasters or terror attacks," nor was it related to an alleged lunchtime gathering of the IUSF, the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party's student organisation, at Colombo University.

Rather, it was part of Wickremesinghe's increasing use of the police and military to crush future struggles, including strikes and protests by workers and youth against the government's International Monetary Fund austerity measures.

Sri Lanka's ruling elite is acutely sensitive to the rising social opposition to the Wickremesinghe government, fearful that this will develop into the sort of mass uprising that last year ousted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Last Tuesday, Cabinet spokesman Bandula Gunawardena told an official media briefing that the cabinet discussed how to respond to the possible

eruption of mass struggles on the May 9 anniversary of violent demonstrations across Sri Lanka.

Those protests, which included setting fire to the president's official residence and other government parliamentarian's homes, however, were a response against a series of brutal attacks by pro-Rajapakse thugs on anti-government protesters on Galle Face Green.

Gunawardena told the media briefing that cabinet ministers discussed the formation of a special presidential commission to investigate how to respond to future mass struggles. He claimed no definite decision had been taken and would not provide any further details.

While the government is nervous about rising anti-government sentiment among workers and the rural poor over its escalating social assault, it retains political power because the unions are working tooth and nail to prevent any independent mobilisation of the working class.

Under conditions where the unions are finding it increasingly difficult to suppress workers' opposition, the government is more and more preparing to use police and military repression to crush workers' struggles.

For millions of Sri Lankans life is becoming unbearable. The percentage of Sri Lankans living in poverty doubled from 13 percent in 2021 to 25 percent in 2022.

Commodity prices and inflation continue to increase, sharply eroding the purchasing power of the masses who face severe food insecurity. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost in the private sector, including in the garment and construction industries and the small industry sector.

IMF-dictated austerity, including direct taxes on working people, increased electricity and water tariffs, and other inroads, will further intensify the social disaster facing workers and rural toilers.

In addition, the government is moving to axe hundreds of thousands of jobs through the restructuring and privatisation of state enterprises. This involves 430 state-owned enterprises, including 39 corporations, 218 companies and 173 statutory boards being restructured or privatised under a national agency established by the finance ministry.

Last weekend's security operation in Colombo is an integral part of readying the police, military and other

sections of the repressive state apparatus to deal with the inevitable eruption of working class struggles against the government.

In line with these preparations the Wickremesinghe government has imposed essential service regulations on key public sector areas, criminalising strikes and political action taken by workers in these industries. These regulations are being renewed each month via extraordinary government gazette and the security forces kept on standby nationally under the public security act.

The mass deployment of military and police forces last weekend is a warning to the working class that to fight the government's social assaults it must organise independently of the trade unions and all bourgeois parties. This requires formation of its own action committees and the development of political and industrial struggle for a workers' and peasants' government committed to a socialist and internationalist program.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact