

Sri Lankan government declares “security operation to wipe out underworld”

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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On August 25, Sri Lanka’s Western Province Senior Deputy Inspector General (SDIG) Deshabandu Tennakoon told the *Daily Mirror* that the police, in collaboration with its Special Task force (STF), had launched a “special operation” to crack down on organised criminals and associated individuals. The measures, he declared, aimed to wipe out organised crime in the country within the “next six months.”

Three days later, Minister for Public Security Tiran Alles, held a press conference confirming the SDIG’s announcement. The “security forces have also been instructed to shoot if necessary” during these operations, he declared. This means Sri Lankan police are now allowed to shoot “suspects” with impunity.

Minister Alles indicated that these special operations were in line with instructions from President Ranil Wickremesinghe. While Alles and SDIG Tennakoon did not say when the operations commenced, the news reports indicate that raids began in June.

In fact, well-prepared police operations are occurring in areas where workers and oppressed people live—in Colombo and its suburbs and in other parts of the country. The police, of course, may net a few underworld kingpins and showcase them in official propaganda to justify the crackdowns.

However, we warn that the real targets of the Wickremesinghe government’s so-called “anti-crime” operations are the working class and the poor. Confronting rising mass opposition to its International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures, the government is using extra-judicial measures to try intimidate working people and suppress the rising mass opposition.

To justify its actions, the police have cited a recent increase in gun violence between “organised criminal or underworld gangs.” According to police reports, 70 shooting incidents have been recorded this year up until August 31, claiming 41 lives and resulting in injuries to 30 others. These crimes, the police claim, have mainly occurred in the western and southern provinces.

Recent police operations include:

On June 12, police and military conducted a special joint operation in Borella, a densely populated working-class area in Colombo. Thirty five people were arrested, accused of possessing various drugs, and 19 others taken in for questioning.

On 26 June, police raided several places in Colombo’s South Division in a “special search operation” to apprehend drug traffickers.

On 1 July, Alles deployed 20 special operation teams in Southern Province and 15 in the Western Province to crack down on underworld operations. Several suspects were killed by police and others accused of murder were arrested in other raids.

The most revealing indication of the government’s real political concerns was its police-military operation on May 9, at Colombo University, Colombo Fort and Galle Face Green. This involved the mobilisation of thousands of armed soldiers, and STF and riot police personnel equipped with water cannons and the establishment of roadblocks.

As government spokesman Bandula Gunawardena told a media briefing, the mobilisation followed a cabinet discussion on how to respond to a possible eruption of anti-government protests. It was the first anniversary of the violent attacks on May 9 by Rajapakse government thugs on protesters who had been occupying Galle Face Green since April 2022.

Mass anger over these assaults developed into a nationwide mass movement, including two general strikes that ultimately forced President Gotabaya Rajapakse to flee the country on July 13 and then resign.

The movement that brought down Rajapakse was diverted by the trade unions, backed by pseudo-left groups, including Frontline Socialist Party, into supporting opposition capitalist parties, Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. While this opened the way for the installation of Ranil Wickremesinghe as president, his discredited government and Sri Lanka’s political establishment are haunted by last year’s uprising and the widespread popular anger over ongoing social attacks on

workers and the poor.

Having negotiated a \$US3 billion loan from the IMF, the Wickremesinghe government is imposing job destruction, privatisation, increased taxes, higher costs for essential goods and utilities, and other brutal measures.

On March 1 and 15 this year, half a million workers walked out on strike each day to protest against the government's IMF measures. Although the trade unions limited and contained this action, the government knows it cannot rely indefinitely on these increasingly despised bureaucracies and must strengthen the repressive powers of the state apparatus.

Sri Lankan governments have a long and bloody history of whipping up communalism and extra-judicial measures to divide and terrorise the working class.

In 1983, then United National Party (UNP) government provoked a communalist war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which, after almost 30 years of bloody conflict, ended with the defeat of the separatist organisation and the death of hundreds of thousands, mainly Tamil masses, and massive social devastation.

Colombo's war included the development of racist paramilitary organisations that were used to abduct, torture and simply "disappear" Tamil youth. Tamil parents and relatives are still campaigning to find out what happened to their loved ones.

Between 1988 and 1990, paramilitaries and death-squads were unleashed by the UNP government and the security establishment to crush rural unrest in the island's south, killing around 60,000 youth.

In August 2009, three months after the military defeat of the LTTE, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government declared "war on the underworld." Thousands of people were subjected to police harassments and some jailed during these operations.

Similar "special operations" were launched by President Maithripala Sirisena during his so-called "good governance" period. In 2018, Sirisena called for an end to Sri Lanka's 43-year moratorium on executions, and in January 2019, he made a state visit to the Philippines.

Sirisena hailed President Rodrigo Duterte's so-called war on drugs as an "example to the world." As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, the death toll was horrendous. Under Duterte, officially 7,080 people were killed—2,555 by the police and 4,525 by death squads—with an average 30 deaths per day. The actual death toll was much higher.

President Wickremesinghe's calls for special police operations against underworld crime is no accident. He was a minister in UNP governments that provoked the anti-Tamil communal war against the LTTE and 1988–1990 murderous campaign against rural youth carried out by death squads

allied with security forces.

Workers should also recall that Sri Lankan governments have unleashed police and military violence to suppress the class struggle. There are many examples from the past decade alone.

* In May 2011, the government deployed armed police to Katunayake Free Trade Zone against workers protesting the government's attempt to slash their pension fund. Police opened fire, killing one worker and injuring several others.

* In February 2012, police fired on a protest of fishermen in Chilaw killing one fisherman.

* In 2013, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government deployed military to suppress a protest by villagers in Rathupaswala, Gampaha. The military opened fire, killing three people and injuring scores of others.

* In April 2022, police killed a 40-year-old father of two after opening fire on protesters demanding affordable fuel at Rambukkana.

Predictably, the establishment media has endorsed the Wickremesinghe's "special operation" against organised crime. There has not been a word of criticism from the parliamentary opposition parties, who are conscious that these actions are aimed at the working class and anyone resisting the government's social attacks.

In line with its police and military raids, the Wickremesinghe regime is maintaining its repressive Essential Public Services Act which is directed against industrial action by workers in key industries, such as electricity, petroleum and health.

Likewise, Wickremesinghe continues to keep all branches of the military on standby in all of the country's 25 districts and territorial waters. It is also preparing to impose a new counter-terrorism act to give sweeping powers to the police and armed forces.

The police and military operations against organised crime are one more component in the buildup and mobilisation of the capitalist state against the working class and the preparations for dictatorial forms of rule.



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