

A young man dies after torture by the police in northern Sri Lanka

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In a tragic death, a young Tamil man who was brutally assaulted in police custody in war-torn Jaffna on November 19, has become the latest victim of police extrajudicial killings in Sri Lanka.

On November 8, Nagarajah Alex, a 25-year unemployed worker in Vaddukoddai, was arrested along with a 20-year-old friend by the area police over an alleged robbery. However, they were not remanded or released for four days after their arrest. Instead, the police tortured Alex, confining him secretly in a house—which appears to be a torture chamber—behind the police station.

It is illegal to detain a person for more than 24 hours after a police arrest without producing him or her before a magistrate.

When hundreds of residents in the area protested, the police were forced to produce the two young men before the acting magistrate of Mallakam on November 12. The magistrate ordered Alex to be remanded until November 24.

The other young man was released on bail but the media reported that his family was threatened by police, and coerced into producing a letter saying he had not been tortured.

Alex was shifted to the Jaffna prison under the order of the court. However, based on an examination by a Judicial Medical Officer (JMO), Alex was admitted on the same day to the Jaffna teaching hospital because of severe injuries to his wrist due to torture. After four days he was discharged from hospital without even consulting the JMO and sent back to prison on November 16.

On November 19, Alex was taken back to Jaffna teaching hospital by prison officials but pronounced dead on admission.

According to the JMO report presented to the court,

Alex's death was due to police torture.

The JMO report stated: "There were multiple injuries (abrasions and contusions) noted in the back of the trunk, both upper limbs and both lower limbs." It concluded the young man died because of damage caused to his kidney.

This murder has provoked opposition among Tamil people in Sri Lanka's north and around the world against police brutality. Thousands participated in Alex's funeral procession and condemned the police. Fearing protests, extra police and military personnel were deployed around the Vaddukoddai Police Station, and road barriers were erected.

Amid the mass anger, on November 24, the Mallakam court ordered the arrest of four police officers involved in the torture.

Though the police officers were arrested in a bid to defuse public outrage, similar cases in the past have shown how the police and authorities eventually bury such cases.

The Sri Lankan government and the law enforcement authorities have given the police free hand to carry out such practices with impunity.

An official police statement stated that a special committee was formed to investigate the case. This will be a cover up of the police crimes.

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited Alex's house, where his father Nadarajah shared the painful experience with us.

Nadarajah's family, from a peasant background, has gone through endless suffering. During the Colombo regime's three-decade-long war against the Tamil population, the family was forced to flee to refugee camps to avoid the Sri Lanka military's shelling attacks.

After the war ended, they returned to Jaffna but had

to live in a relative's house in Siththangeny village. This house itself is in a dilapidated condition. Without adequate income, Nadarajah could not educate his children.

Nadarajah said he came to know that his son was asking for water while in custody but the police prevented him from providing water. Realising his son's dangerous situation, "we went to the police station to see our son, but police did not allow us to see him."

Only after Nadarajah complained to the Human Rights Commission office in Jaffna on November 10, did the police allow him to see his son.

Alex told his father of the cruel torture methods he was subjected to by police officials. Nadarajah said: "My son was blindfolded and his hands were tied from behind. He was tied to a pole with his ankles hanging about 2-3 feet above the ground. For over three hours police assaulted him while he remained in that position, demanding my son confess to the theft."

The police covered his son's head with polythene bag that was immersed into petrol. "My son moaned with stomach pain and said he was not able to eat. In the hospital, after two days, he could not make any move."

As a result, Nadarajah had to help his son to go to toilet and to change clothes. "It should not happen to anyone else," the tearing father said.

Nadarajah told the WSWS that his son could have been saved if he had been able to get proper medical treatment.

"On November 19, I was told Alex was admitted to the hospital again. While going there, my son passed away. We don't know whether he passed away in the prison," the weeping Nadarajah said.

Alex's death after police torture is not an isolated incident. This brutal event points to the repressive conditions in the war-ravaged north and east of Sri Lanka, which have been under military occupation for decades. The police and military have taken the law into their hands.

Similar incidents are frequently reported from other parts of the country as well.

Recently, a 42-year-old plantation resident, R. Rajakumari, who worked as a housemaid in a wealthy family's house near Colombo was arrested by the Welikada police on a complaint of theft. She died while in the police custody.

Only after widespread anger erupted among plantation workers did police authorities arrest four officers and transfer several others. In the investigation, it was found there was no official police record of the victim's arrest.

Human rights lawyer Senaka Perera told the media that during 11 months of this year alone, 11 persons have been killed either in police custody or during operations to arrest them.

During the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from July 1983 to May 2009, the police and military used the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act to arrest Tamil youth in particular, whom they tortured to extract confessions or simply killed.

Tens of thousands of Sinhala rural youth were subjected to brutal repression by the military and police during the 1988-1990 period in the southern part of the country.

Successive governments in Sri Lanka prosecuted both the communal war and the rural massacres, providing immunity for the military and police.

Custodial deaths and extrajudicial killings are still frequent in Sri Lanka. Police often get off scot-free.

Individuals suspected of drug dealing and underworld activities are taken by police to reveal hidden drugs or weapons then are killed. The usual story is that they tried to escape or grabbed weapons from the police. In the ensuing alleged fight, police declare they were compelled to shoot the suspects dead.

These developments are part and parcel of moves by the Sri Lankan ruling elite, which is in deep economic crisis, to forge and prepare police-state measures to suppress opposition in the working class to the government's austerity drive.



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