

Sri Lanka: Negombo Prison riots leave at least 20 people dead

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At least 20 prisoners were killed and nearly 100 people, mostly prisoners, were wounded on July 6 in clashes that erupted at the prison in the coastal town Negombo. It is a grim reminder of past prison massacres in Sri Lanka's history.

The carnage came just one day after an earlier clash at the same facility claimed two lives on July 5, bringing the death toll from the unrest to at least 27. Seven of the deceased were prison officials.

A number of the seriously injured were transferred to the National Hospital in Colombo for specialist treatment, while others were treated at Negombo Hospital. While the government says it has begun investigations into the riots and the causes of the deaths, available evidence indicates that at least some inmates were killed by gunfire. Dr. Pushpa Gamlath, director of Negombo Hospital, told Agence France-Presse: "There are some victims with gunshot injuries, some with cuts and severe bruises."

According to Prisons Commissioner and Media spokesperson A. C. Gajanayake, the official account is as follows: Violence first erupted on July 5 between remand prisoners and convicted inmates after the exposure of an alleged prison drug-trafficking network orchestrated by an underworld-linked trafficker. Although the unrest was temporarily contained, clashes resumed the following morning during breakfast. Authorities claim that the inmates attacked prison officers and attempted to breach the main gate, prompting officers to use what they described as the minimum force necessary to restore order.

This version of events is being uncritically regurgitated by the corporate media, despite serious gaps. It does not explain how a supposedly controlled situation on the first day erupted into a deadly clash despite the presence of significant security forces, including members of the notorious Special Task Force (STF) who had been brought in to "control" the situation. In fact, the STF and Sri Lanka Police, under successive governments, have a well-documented history of provocation—deliberately or recklessly triggering violence in prisons and

communities—followed by lethal crackdowns, systematic cover-ups, and near-total impunity for perpetrators.

After news of the initial clashes on July 5 spread, hundreds of prisoners' relatives gathered outside Negombo Prison seeking news of their loved ones. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government responded by deploying hundreds of personnel from the Sri Lanka Army, Navy, Air Force, Police, and the STF, claiming the operation was necessary to maintain security. The area around the prison was transformed into what resembled a war zone, with heavily armed security forces, armoured vehicles, military jeeps and drones to intimidate those gathered outside.

As the violence escalated, thousands of anguished family members screamed, wept, and repeatedly demanded information about the fate of their loved ones, knowing those inside were exposed to the gunfire echoing through the prison complex. Their desperate appeals were ignored. Gunfire continued to be heard during live television broadcasts. Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara later claimed military personnel had used only "minimum force" to bring the situation "under control."

A video widely circulated on social media showed a prison officer outside the closed main gate firing through a narrow opening toward the area where the clashes were taking place. Questioned about the footage on July 7, Acting Commissioner General of Prisons Prasad Hemantha Kumara defended the officer's actions, claiming the shots were fired to prevent a catastrophic prison breach and to protect officers trapped inside. His remarks make clear that prison officers and security forces deliberately opened fire to disperse prisoners gathered near the main gate.

Angry relatives, including mothers and wives of prisoners, most of them poor villagers, denounced the government and police for failing to protect the prisoners and for refusing to give any information.

Justice Minister Nanayakkara sought to justify the use of lethal force by claiming that inmates had attempted to "sabotage the smooth functioning of prison operations" after

the government had “taken stern action to prevent drugs and other illegal contraband from entering the prisons.” He pointed to the destruction of a body scanner and CCTV cameras during the unrest.

This narrative functions as a political cover for the killings, folding them into the government’s escalating “war on drugs.”

Nanayakkara told Parliament on July 7 that the Negombo killings were a “tragedy” and pledged to address staff shortages and overcrowding in prisons. He announced several investigations, including a three-member committee comprising a retired Supreme Court judge, an Attorney General’s Department official, and a senior attorney-at-law. Like similar inquiries launched after previous prison massacres, these investigations will serve as political cover-ups, shielding prison officials and security forces from responsibility rather than delivering justice for the victims and their families.

On July 7, the Committee for Protecting the Rights of Prisoners (CPRP) alleged that inmates transferred from Negombo Prison after the violence are being subjected to torture in the prisons to which they were relocated. Around 700 prisoners were transferred to prisons across the country. The CPRP also warned that five inmates, including Lasantha Pradeep Kumara, accused of leading the unrest, have been placed in secret isolation, creating “a severe threat to their lives” and exposing them to a high risk of torture.

The claim that prison massacres result from inter-gang violence or drug-related conspiracies is a well-worn tactic of the Sri Lankan state. When 11 inmates were shot dead at Mahara Prison in November 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s government blamed psychiatric medication, drug dealers and shadowy conspirators. Prison Reform Minister Sudarshini Fernandopulle ludicrously invoked “an invisible hand which activated suddenly.”

The Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists was compelled to issue a statement debunking these fabrications, noting that the claimed connection between psychiatric drugs and violent behaviour was “without any rational basis.” The government’s story was a lie from start to finish, designed to obscure the fact that prison guards and STF officers had opened fire on unarmed inmates demanding COVID-19 protections.

Sri Lanka’s prisons are overcrowded, under-resourced, and resemble a living hell, creating conditions in which tensions can easily erupt into clashes. Negombo Prison, built to accommodate about 900 inmates, currently holds nearly 2,400.

The severe overcrowding has also heightened the danger of infectious disease outbreaks. On July 5, alongside the unrest, a group of women prisoners climbed onto the rooftop

to protest a dengue outbreak and demand treatment for about 20 infected inmates. Essential medicines were unavailable, and infected prisoners had reportedly not been isolated. In a video circulated on social media, the women appealed for urgent medical care. Pro-government media, however, falsely portrayed the protest as support for one of the rival prisoner factions.

Overall, Sri Lanka’s prisons—built to accommodate just 11,762 inmates—now hold more than 42,000, over four times their intended capacity. In its 850-page 2021 report, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) documented conditions in which prisoners are forced to sleep standing, defecate into shopping bags, and survive on food that, as one inmate stated, “even cats and dogs” would reject.

The overwhelming majority of prisoners come from the poorest layers of society, with many held on remand simply because they cannot afford bail or legal representation. Around 75 percent of Sri Lanka’s prison population consists of remand prisoners awaiting trial.

Successive governments have responded to prison violence with promises of reform—from Mahinda Rajapaksa’s rehabilitation pledges to Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s elaborately branded five-year reform plans; from Sirisena’s transitional justice promises to the JVP/NPP’s “systemic change” mandate.

Such promises are an empty political ritual: committees are appointed and plans published in an attempt to placate popular outrage. Meanwhile the conditions that produce violence—overcrowding, poverty-driven remand detention and impunity for security forces—have only continued to worsen.

The Negombo killings follow prison riots and massacres at Mahara in 2020, Welikada in 2012, Anuradhapura in 2011, and Kalutara in 2000. They are the logical expression of a government that has strengthened the architecture of a police state since taking office in 2024 and is responding to increasing popular unrest with brutal force.



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