

Inmates face torture after prison riots in Sri Lanka

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In the wake of the deadly July 5–6 prison violence in the coastal city of Negombo, Sri Lanka, which claimed dozens of lives, reports are emerging that prisoners accused of instigating the unrest are being subjected to torture.

According to the official narrative, the violence followed the exposure of an alleged drug-trafficking network operating inside the prison, and officers used only the minimum necessary force after inmates attacked staff, seized weapons and attempted to escape.

Of the first confirmed 27 deaths, 20 were prisoners and seven were prison police officials. Another 54 inmates and 23 officers were injured during the two days of clashes.

Two prisoners transferred to other facilities died on July 8—one at Boossa High Security Prison and another at Agunukolapelessa Prison—under unexplained circumstances, and one prison officer succumbed to injuries on July 9, bringing the cumulative death toll to 30.

Immediately after the deadly riots, Negombo Prison was declared a crime scene and more than 1,000 prisoners were transferred, backed by a military cordon, from Negombo to five prisons—Agunakolapelessa, Bogambara, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kuruwita. The justice minister and prison authorities claimed the transfers were necessary to restore order.

In carrying out the transfers, prison authorities ignored the anguish of relatives gathered outside Negombo Prison seeking information about their loved ones. Details of injured inmates were released by Negombo Hospital after hours of desperate appeals from families who had been left completely in the dark. Television footage has shown relatives of the transferred prisoners pleading with prison officials, who continue to refuse to provide clear information on the whereabouts and condition of individual inmates.

This situation has raised legitimate fears because Sri Lanka's prison system is notorious for inhuman treatment and the brutal torture of prisoners. On July 7, the Committee for Protecting the Rights of Prisoners (CPRP) alleged that inmates transferred from Negombo Prison were being tortured in the prisons to which they had been relocated. The CPRP also warned that five inmates, including Lasantha Pradeep Kumara, accused of leading the unrest, had been placed in secret isolation, creating

“a severe threat to their lives” and exposing them to a high risk of torture.

On July 8, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL), in a letter to the Commissioner General of Prisons, noted that on the evening of July 7 it had received information that several inmates transferred to the above-mentioned prisons had been subjected to “torture and other forms of ill-treatment.” When a team from the HRCSL's Rapid Response Unit visited Welikada Prison at 8:30 p.m. to inquire into the inmates' situation, it was denied access, despite the Commission being empowered under the HRCSL Act to enter any prison at any time to conduct such examinations. The letter also indicated that inmates transferred to other prisons were being subjected to torture.

Amnesty International issued a statement urging an “immediate investigation” and full access for the HRCSL to check on inmate welfare. Amid mounting pressure, access was granted the following day, but the Commission said the delay deprived it of the opportunity to conduct a timely investigation. The HRCSL said it had summoned the Commissioner General of Prisons (Covering Up Duties) and the Chief Jailer of Welikada Prison to explain the circumstances under which access to the prison had been denied.

The two post-transfer deaths of inmates on July 8 starkly illustrate why rights groups view Sri Lanka's prison system as a lethal, unaccountable apparatus. One inmate transferred from Negombo to Boossa High Security Prison died after what officials blandly termed a “sudden illness,” with no name, medical details or timeline disclosed. Amnesty International immediately flagged the case as deeply suspicious, stressing that Boossa is a military-administered facility where detainees have been hidden from inspection and independent oversight is severely curtailed.

The second prisoner, transferred to Agunukolapelessa, also died on July 8 without any public explanation. This came just weeks after an earlier unexplained death at the prison, said to have been from a “sudden illness.” In this context of secrecy, prior abuses and systemic torture documented by the CPRP and UN bodies, it is entirely reasonable to suspect that these prisoners may have died because of violent ill-treatment rather than natural causes.

Amid a frenzied media campaign portraying the dead prison officers as “heroes” who “sacrificed their lives” to prevent a prison break by allegedly drug-addicted underworld figures, the plight of the transferred inmates has become increasingly dire. Echoing the government’s narrative, the right-wing Island newspaper declared in a July 8 editorial: “The drug mafia has flexed its muscle again. The government has embarked on an ambitious campaign to rid the country of narcotics, and rightly so. The ongoing nationwide drug bust deserves the fullest public cooperation.”

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara has repeatedly defended prison officers, claiming they used only the “minimum force” in self-defence to restore order. After prison officials urged the minister to “protect” an officer filmed firing from the prison gate, Nanayakkara endorsed their account, insisting the officers would be treated “fairly.” This amounts to a political signal that the shooting will be officially justified.

On July 10, the Daily Mirror reported the forensic findings of a five-member panel of senior Judicial Medical Officers, chaired by Dr. Sujeewa Wickramasinghe, into the Negombo Prison killings. The panel conducted autopsies on 24 of the 28 bodies transferred to Negombo Hospital. It found that 14 of the 24 deaths were caused by gunshot wounds, while nine victims died from blunt force injuries. An open verdict was returned in one case pending further investigation.

According to the post-mortem reports, the prison officers died from severe head injuries caused by blunt force trauma. These findings directly contradict Minister Nanayakkara’s claim, reported by ABC News on July 7, that inmates seized firearms and shot at guards, forcing security personnel to return fire. They further undermine Acting Prisons Commissioner Prasad Hemantha Kumara’s defence of the officers’ actions.

These officers were not ordinary jailers. According to the state-run Daily News, all seven prison officials killed at Negombo belonged to the Sri Lanka Prisons Emergency Action and Tactical (SPEAT) Force, a unit within the Department of Prisons created in 2022 under President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and staffed with former tri-forces military personnel, ostensibly to “thwart corruption and misconduct in prisons.”

In an interview on a popular YouTube talk show on July 9, Sudesh Nandimal Silva, convener of the CPRP, alleged that the clash on the morning of July 6 was ignited by provocative actions by SPEAT personnel, who, he said, forced prisoners to kneel and apologise to prison officials, inflaming tensions inside an already volatile, overcrowded facility.

The CPRP, together with about 150 people including relatives of the deceased inmates, staged a protest outside the Ministry of Justice in Colombo yesterday. Demonstrators demanded justice for the prisoners and the immediate release of accurate information about those detained. They carried placards reading: “Hands off Negombo prisoners,” “Today inmates, tomorrow you,” “Stop the prisoner witch-hunt,” “Stop attacking and killing prisoners,” and “Immediately provide

information about inmates.”

Last month, a detailed submission by the CPRP to the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT) exposed Sri Lanka’s prison system as one marked by systemic torture, extreme overcrowding and institutional impunity.

Prisoners are reportedly confined to as little as 1.2 square metres of space, forced to sleep in shifts or beside toilets, and endure filthy, inhumane conditions. The submission alleges routine torture, including severe beatings, waterboarding, suspension upside down, sensory deprivation and sexual abuse, as well as degrading body cavity searches by non-medical personnel.

It also raises concerns over the military’s control of several detention facilities, where detainees are allegedly hidden from inspections and lawyers and relatives face intimidation. Citing at least 173 custodial deaths between January 2024 and May 2025, the report condemns the lack of accountability for abuses. It further highlights a severe healthcare crisis, with tuberculosis rates reportedly 100 times higher than among the general population, shortages of medical staff, widespread mental health problems, and inadequate access to basic hygiene products for female prisoners.

Sri Lanka’s prisons, built to accommodate just 11,762 inmates, now hold more than 42,000, nearly four times their intended capacity. Negombo Prison, built for approximately 900 inmates, was holding nearly 2,400 at the time of the killings. These hellish conditions inevitably produce tensions that can easily erupt into violent clashes.

Around 75 percent of the prison population in the country consists of remand prisoners awaiting trial. According to Ambika Satkunanathan, lawyer and former Commissioner of the HRCSL, in 2023, 67.8 percent of those imprisoned were jailed due to their inability to pay fines, which is “the criminalization of poverty.”

The working class in Sri Lanka and internationally must draw the necessary conclusions. Prison massacres are not aberrations; they are the logical expression of a capitalist state that responds to the deepening social crisis with ever more brutal forms of repression. The fight against prison violence and state killings cannot be separated from the fight against the capitalist system itself.

Only a revolutionary movement of the working class, armed with a socialist perspective and independent of all capitalist parties—including the ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power—can put an end to these atrocities.



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