

One person killed as Sri Lankan military and police suppress prison protest

Naveen Dewage
5 August 2026

The Sri Lankan government mobilised hundreds of police and military personnel to suppress a protest at Mahara Prison, located around 13 kilometres from Colombo, on August 1 and 2.

Thousands of inmates were protesting unbearable conditions and demanding basic facilities. A police spokesman told the media that as the forces “restored order,” one prisoner was killed and about eight were seriously injured.

This is the second deadly prison clash in Sri Lanka in a month. Rioting at Negombo Prison on July 5–6 was brutally put down by the police, including the notorious Special Task Force (STF), in an operation that killed 21 prisoners. Fourteen prison guards were also killed.

After the unrest at Mahara on the afternoon of August 1 was suppressed, another inmate protest developed in the evening and continued the following day. Reports indicate that prison officials, using some inmate agents, harassed others who had participated in the first protest, triggering further unrest.

The government mobilised a huge security force to terrorise inmates, transforming the entire prison and surrounding area into a war zone, as it did after the Negombo prison riots. It deployed hundreds of police and STF personnel, as well as soldiers from the army and navy. Armoured personnel carriers fitted with guns roamed around the prison, while Air Force helicopters flew overhead, directing searchlights onto the prison and surrounding areas.

Several areas near the facility were placed under police curfew from the night of August 1. The following day, road barriers were erected and police patrols were carried out.

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara, speaking in Parliament on August 4, attempted to justify the brutality, claiming that the unrest “bore clear signs of

sabotage and arson” and was an “organised attempt to cripple the facility’s administration.” He added: “This shows they had a clear intention... If there are any conspirators, we will take necessary action against them.” The police went further, naming alleged “criminals.”

According to the official explanation, four inmates started a protest by climbing onto a roof during visiting hours on Saturday evening. Prison officials attempted to negotiate. After 15 minutes, the four were joined by 1,000 inmates. The authorities did not explain why the protest erupted.

During the hours of unrest, family members of prisoners gathered around the prison gate. Some had arrived in the afternoon to visit their relatives but were not allowed to do so. Others came out of fear, knowing the history of brutal repression in the prisons.

Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners (CPRP) president and attorney-at-law Senaka Perera told a press conference that more than 4,400 inmates are currently being held at the Mahara prison, which was only meant to hold about 900 people.

Nationally, the prison system houses more than 42,000 inmates in facilities built to accommodate only 11,762.

Perera said prisoners were living in horrible conditions, without adequate toilet facilities, ward space or water. Five-litre water cans have to be brought in to supplement the supply. Sometimes inmates are forced to remain standing without sleep for days.

CPRP Convenor Sudesh Nandimal Silva pointed to discriminatory and corrupt practices within the prisons. “Large-scale racketeers with financial power receive luxury comforts and special privileges inside the prison, [while] ordinary inmates—arrested for a small piece of cannabis, a small piece of heroin—languish for

years without even Government Analyst reports,” he said.

They rejected the police claim that the gathering of inmates’ relatives near the prison was “pre-planned.” They said it was natural for people concerned about the wellbeing of their relatives to gather there.

Speaking to the *Daily Morning* on August 2, Senaka Perera said the initial protest was against “discriminatory treatment. Although the protest later subsided, a group of inmates subsequently began threatening and harassing those who had taken part in the demonstration while enjoying the protection of prison officials.”

Following the protest’s suppression, prison authorities transferred around 104 inmates to other facilities including Dumbara, Welikada, Kalutara, Badulla, Polonnaruwa, Batticaloa and Boossa, a military-administered prison with severely restricted independent oversight. The transfers occurred amid reports of a serious risk of systematic retaliation and torture against inmates across Sri Lanka’s prison system following the Negombo Prison incident, according to the CPRP.

The cabinet met on Monday and immediately approved a proposal by the Justice Minister to “expedite the drafting of legislation to introduce house arrest as a legal alternative to remand and imprisonment for eligible suspects and convicted offenders in a bid to ease overcrowding in prisons.” At the same time, prison capacity across the country is being expanded with the construction of new buildings.

Successive governments have a brutal record of ruthlessly putting down inmate unrest, much of which has erupted over demands for decent conditions.

In November 2020, 11 inmates were shot dead and dozens injured at this same Mahara Prison when they protested, demanding health and safety measures to protect them from the COVID-19 pandemic during the government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse.

In 2012, security forces killed dozens of inmates at Welikada Prison. Similar massacres occurred at Anuradhapura in 2011 and Kalutara in 2000. Each was followed by the appointment of committees of inquiry that functioned not to deliver justice but to bury the incidents.

The terror campaign at Mahara, just one month after the brutal crackdown at Negombo Prison against

helpless and unarmed inmates, is a warning to the working class and the poor.

The repression at Mahara is not an isolated incident nor simply the result of overcrowded prisons. It is part of the broader assault being carried out by the government of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake against workers and the poor as it implements the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Acting in the interests of international finance capital, the Dissanayake government is ruthlessly enforcing the repayment of foreign debt and protecting the profits of big business. As the social crisis deepens and opposition grows, the government is increasingly relying on the police, military and repressive state apparatus to suppress resistance.

The repeated use of military force against unarmed prisoners also exposes the bankruptcy of the perspective advanced by the fake left parties, the Frontline Socialist Party and the United Socialist Party, which claim that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government can be pressured to implement reforms to improve conditions in prisons.

Workers and the rural and urban poor must reject the government’s attempts to demonise prisoners as criminals in order to justify violent repression. The conditions in Sri Lanka’s prisons are a product of the same capitalist system that condemns millions of workers and poor people to poverty, insecurity and deprivation. The brutality of the state will only be ended through the mobilisation of the working class in the struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)