

New security measures turn Sri Lanka's plantation areas into a virtual war zone

By K. Ratnayake
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Over the last two months the Peoples Alliance (PA) government in Sri Lanka has sharply escalated security measures in the central hills district of Nuwara Eliya where more than 200,000 Tamil-speaking tea plantation workers live. New army camps are being established along with registration and other security checks that are virtually identical to those in force in the war zones in the North and East.

* An army camp has been set up at Thalawakelle in an abandoned tea factory. About 50 troops are stationed there and conduct regular nightly patrols. In 1986, the army set up a camp at the same place, but had to withdraw following protests after a soldier raped a local Tamil girl.

Another army base with 25 soldiers has been established at Castlereigh, six kilometres from Hatton, where there was only an army checkpoint earlier. At the same time, police have stationed one of their commando units at Hatton with about 25 men. Police commandos have military training and are used in “emergency situations.” Other military camps are to be established at Bogawantalawa and Maskeliya, also in the Nuwara Eliya district.

* A special registration system is to be established in the plantation areas. In late December, police called a meeting of plantation trade union leaders in the Galaha area near Kandy and told them that every family had to display a group photograph in their homes with the names of each family member. Copies of the photo along with photographs of individual family members have to be given to police.

At present every citizen over 18 years of age in Sri Lanka must carry a national identity card. But PA general secretary D.M. Jayaratna announced last year that the government would introduce a special identity card for Gampola, Nawalapitiya, Galaha and Dolosbage in the Kandy district and Hanguranketha in the Nuwara Eliya

district. The exact purpose of the new card is not clear but in the northern Jaffna peninsula the military uses special identity cards to restrict the movement of people into and out of the area.

* Security forces throughout the plantation areas have been put on a high state of alert. A section of the police commando unit stationed at Hatton is ready in a truck to be dispatched at a moment's notice. Teams of police now regularly patrol so-called trouble spots in Hatton and Thalawakelle. Checkpoints on the Colombo-Hatton highway have been strengthened and all vehicles, men and their baggage are systematically searched.

The tough new security measures follow protests by plantation workers outraged at the brutal massacre of 29 Tamil detainees at the Bindunuwewa rehabilitation camp in late October. A Sinhala mob stormed into the camp and systematically hacked to death the inmates. Police stood by while the thugs broke into the centre and shot several detainees as they attempted to flee. As news of the murders became known, demonstrations and strikes erupted in the plantation areas as well as in the north and east.

The Nuwara Eliya district was at the centre of the protests. Among the detainees killed was a 41-year-old father of three children from Kotagala in the heart of Nuwara Eliya. Tens of thousands of estate workers throughout that district took part in one form of protest or another—hoisting white flags, demonstrations and strikes. Demands were raised for a hartal [combined general strike and shop closures]. Banners and posters were emblazoned with slogans such as “Condemn the Bindunuwewa killings,” “Stop the massacre of Tamils” and “Oppose the murderous government”.

Sinhala chauvinist groups and the security forces responded violently. Demonstrations at Thalawakelle, Kotagala, Watawala, Watagoda and Ginigathena were subjected to racist taunts, provocation and physical attack

by Sinhala extremist thugs backed by the police and army. Police arrested protesters and killed six people in separate incidents. When Tamil youth retaliated, racist gangs went on a rampage looting and burning Tamil-owned shops.

A wave of arrests followed which were only halted when workers at the Tienstien division of the Bogawantalawa Plantations went on strike on November 13 demanding the withdrawal of an order by a local police superintendent for 27 workers to appear before him. Police finally withdrew the list but kept another 68 workers detained for nearly a month.

The Sinhala chauvinist parties such as Sihala Urumaya or Sinhala Heritage (SU) seized on the unrest to demand that the government protect Sinhalese people in the plantation districts. SU has waged a sustained racist campaign issuing statements and posters claiming that “the terrorists” aim to “annihilate Sinhalese in the central hills” and demanding the deployment of the army.

Media outlets in Colombo, both government-owned and private, have picked up on the theme. For months they have been agitating for tougher security measures, claiming that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been infiltrating the plantation areas.

Tamils brought from southern India by the British colonialists to work on the tea and rubber estates, have long been a target for attack by Sinhalese politicians. In 1948, shortly after independence, the United National Party (UNP) government abolished the citizenship rights of plantation workers, declaring them to be aliens. In 1964, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (the main party in the present PA government) did a deal with the Indian government to give citizenship rights to some plantation workers while deporting hundreds of thousands of others to India. An estimated 84,000 estate workers in Sri Lanka still have no citizenship rights.

Like other Tamils, plantation workers and their families have suffered systematic discrimination and live under a draconian security regime. Emergency laws renewed every month have been in force for most of the last two decades, giving the police and army sweeping powers. Hundreds of mainly young Tamils have been arbitrarily detained and held without trial as “LTTE suspects” for months and years in camps such as the Bindunuwewa detention centre. The lack of basic democratic rights, compounded by high levels of unemployment and poverty, has fueled widespread resentment and anger against the PA government, which first came to power in 1994 with empty promises to end the country's long

running civil war and to improve living standards.

The response of Tamil workers to the Bindunuwewa massacre clearly shocked the political establishment in Colombo. There had already been two major strikes by plantation workers over low wages and deteriorating conditions—one in May, despite a government ban on all strikes and public meetings, and the second in September. The latter was over the refusal of plantation owners to pay wage increases recommended by the government for all private sector workers.

The protests over the murder of Tamil detainees were not concerned with immediate economic demands but from the outset had a political character directed against the government and the security forces. Such was the feeling among plantation workers that the plantation unions—Up Country Peoples Front (UCPF) and local Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leaders—were reluctantly compelled to support the agitation.

The new security regime is aimed at intensifying the harassment and intimidation of plantation workers. Significantly, in the aftermath of the demonstrations, the CWC and UCPF have encouraged workers to accept the security measures, arguing that the army and police will protect Tamils from Sinhala racists. UCPF leader P. Chandrasekaran, a member of parliament, who was arrested during the protests, has gone one step further and offered to collaborate with police in rounding up workers involved in the demonstrations.

Following the Bindunuwewa massacre the government and the media blamed the “hidden hand” of the LTTE for “provoking” the Sinhala mob to murder Tamil detainees. When plantation workers protested against the outrage it was put down to the work of “LTTE agitators” seeking to stir up trouble even as the security forces and Sinhala thugs attacked the demonstrations. The same reactionary logic is behind the setting up of army camps and the imposition of new security checks in the plantation areas.

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