

Top Sri Lankan official defends mass eviction plans

By Panini Wijesiriwardena
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As opposition grows to the Sri Lankan government's plan to evict 66,000 families from Colombo's shanties, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse has hit back at criticisms. He has falsely claimed that everyone would be provided with alternative accommodation, and branded the city's slums as a breeding ground for crime and drug abuse.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse is an appointed official, but as the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse he has more political clout than most elected government ministers. He presides over the huge defence ministry, which controls not only the armed forces but the police as well. Earlier this year, the government placed the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the Land Reclamation and Development Board (LRDB)—both civilian bodies—under the defence ministry. The defence secretary is the UDA chairman and thus in charge of the eviction plan. He has already used police and soldiers to suppress protests and opposition.

Speaking on World Habitat Day on October 4, Gotabhaya Rajapakse declared that a “wrong opinion” was being spread that families evicted from Colombo would not be provided with alternative accommodation. He claimed that everyone would be given a house worth 2.5 million rupees (\$US22,000). “These families will be given other infrastructure facilities such as health facilities, hospitals and schools. Their living standard should be upgraded gradually,” he said.

World Habitat Day is one of the UN's empty global rituals, in this case to highlight the need for adequate shelter for all. It is not surprising therefore that Defence Secretary Rajapakse used the occasion to repeat the government's empty promises. He provided no details of when or where the 2.5 million-rupee houses would be built.

UDA officials told Sri Lankan business website *FT.com* that the new settlements would be at Peliyagoda, Ekala, Muthurajawela, Aluthmawatha Road and Wanathamulla—up to 20 kilometres from the Colombo city centre. Even if some sort of housing is finally built at these locations, the forced move will be highly disruptive to the families involved, including to their livelihoods and the schooling of their children.

Rajapakse, however, painted a glowing picture of their future. Following the military's defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last year, investment would flow into the country. As the country developed economically, he said, the life of former shanty dwellers and their children would be “beautiful”.

The defence ministry's slum clearance plan for central Colombo is part of the government's so-called economic war to build the country. Rajapakse repeated that “unauthorised structures” had to be cleared to make land—around 390 hectares—available for “development purposes.” The government is hoping to boost tourism and transform Colombo into a commercial hub for South Asia. The real beneficiaries will be private developers and foreign investors.

As for the promise of a 2.5 million-rupee house, one only has to recall the government's pledges during parliamentary elections in April. In a bid for votes, President Rajapakse grandly announced a program of Nagamu Purawara (Let's develop the city). He instructed state officials to upgrade 354 housing estates in just five weeks. After some cosmetic improvements at a few estates, the program was abandoned.

The fate of families already evicted is another warning. In early May, the defence ministry deployed hundreds of police and army personnel to suppress a protest against the demolition of the homes of 45

families on Slave Island in central Colombo. Several families were sent to squalid, makeshift wooden houses in the suburbs of Colombo. Others were given 100,000 rupees each to cover a year's rent and told to find their own accommodation.

The Dematagoda housing project is meant to house some evictees, but only the first stage has been completed. The remaining stages are no more than billboards. Those families who have moved in have no nearby school for their children. The garbage disposal system and health facilities are inadequate. Many of the residents who previously worked as garbage workers, cleaners and street vendors are struggling to make ends meet.

The most sinister aspect of Gotabhaya Rajapakse's speech was his slanders against shanty dwellers. "Underworld activities and drug-related activities are carried out in places where houses have been built illegally in Colombo," he said. "It is not possible for the law enforcement officers to enter some areas. We have to face this reality."

Criminal activities, including drug dealing, undoubtedly take place in the slums of Colombo, where according to a 2003 UN report, youth unemployment is around 60 percent and poverty is widespread. Capitalism not only created this social crisis but feeds off it. The major political parties all have their connections to the criminal underworld and use its gangs for political purposes. Drug kingpins are known to fund their election campaigns.

Rajapakse has repeated the media slur against all shanty dwellers, not because the government intends to address their underlying unemployment and poverty, but as the justification for demolishing their homes and destroying their livelihoods.

In July, a protest of shanty dwellers erupted in Mattakkuliya after the police arrested and beat up a youth falsely accused of drug dealing. The defence ministry sent hundreds of police and soldiers into the area, rounded up around 8,000 residents and detained more than 200 people picked out by hooded informers. The huge security operation was a dress rehearsal for dealing with future opposition to the government's plans.

Shanty dwellers and workers should reject the government's false promises. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that behind Gotabhaya Rajapakse's

speech, preparations are being made to carry out mass evictions. With the SEP's political assistance, residents from Colombo's shanties have formed the Action Committee to Defend the Right to Housing (ACDRH) to campaign for their housing rights.

The SEP calls on residents and workers in other areas and housing estates to follow the ACDRH's lead and build action committees to oppose the government's plans. Hundreds of billions of rupees should be allocated to build decent houses with facilities such as electricity and water—not only for Colombo shanty dwellers but also for the thousands left homeless by the war and the 2004 tsunami. The location of the housing projects should be decided by those affected, through democratic discussion.

These tasks cannot be realised under the profit system. They can be achieved only under a workers' and farmers' government based on socialist policies to reconstruct society to meet the needs of working people, not boost the profits of the wealthy elite.

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