

Sri Lanka: Muslims explain how the organised violence occurred

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Anti-Muslim violence initiated by extremist Sinhala-Buddhist groups in the Teldeniya-Digana area of Kandy began on the evening of March 4 and continued for about four days. The death of a Sinhalese lorry driver, following an assault by four Muslims men, was seized on by right-wing Sinhala-Buddhist formations to unleash their attacks.

Police lifted a curfew on Sunday but social tensions in the Kandy area remain. Police and military personnel are conducting intermittent patrols of Kandy town and the affected area with soldiers stationed at some locations.

According to the police, almost 7,000 security officers, including 3,250 from the army and air force, have been deployed. Over 220 people have been arrested—161 from the Kandy area and 69 from outside the district.

When *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters visited Teldeniya-Digana a few days ago, the damage done by the violence was clearly visible. Houses and shops had been attacked and burnt down, and residents expressed fear, despair and outrage over the vicious destruction suddenly unleashed against them.

According to those interviewed by the WSWS, the violent rampage was initiated by the fascistic Mahasohon Balakaya (MB—Greatest Demon) and Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) formations. Mahasohon Balakaya, which was established a few years ago, has a public office in Digana. Both organisations, which claim to be “protecting” the Sinhala race and Buddhism, are infamous for targeted attacks on Muslims. Sri Lankan police have arrested MB leader Amith Weerasinghe and several other associates on suspicion of directing the violent rampage.

One resident explained to the WSWS: “Mahasohon Balakaya is mainly responsible for the incident. It made a video three years ago in which one of its leaders, Amith Weerasinghe, claimed there was not a single Sinhala shop in Digana. He declared that Digana had become a ‘Muslim country.’”

One youth told WSWS reporters: “It is not the Sinhala-Buddhist civilians in the area that attacked us. The arson and destruction was carried out by extremist groups. In Kengalla [an affected village] alone, around 25 shops and 50 houses were destroyed. Even the mosque was damaged. There was fire everywhere and the area was filled with black smoke.”

“Our Sinhala neighbours helped us like brothers,” he continued. “It is they who protected us. They were very sad for what happened... During Vesak [the main Buddhist festival] we also participate organising Dansal [alms giving]. We don’t condone those four who killed the driver but why are we, the innocent attacked?”

Another resident explained that the extremist thugs, mainly young boys and girls, came into the area on motor cycles and that a lorry was also used for transport. Petrol bombs, metal and wooden bars and stones were used in the attack. While much of the destruction was recorded on CCTV, most of the thugs masked their faces with cloth and the police allowed the violence to occur.

The resident also demanded to know what the ruling United National Party (UNP)-Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government was doing and referred to the government’s deployment of police against university students protesting the privatisation of education.

“They can block kilometres-long protest marches using barricades and teargas, but don’t do anything against several hundred thugs. The thugs can come and attack and then just go away... The politicians in Kandy were sleeping. They did not do anything.”

The resident expressed sadness over the death of the lorry driver. “He was a very good person and very friendly towards Muslim people.”

M. Saheed said, “The attackers wanted us to be provoked and to retaliate so that they can say we are ISIS. But we are peace-loving people and the majority of Sinhala people are with us. They are helping us,

providing food and rooms for shelter and temporary accommodation.”

Rizvi, who works in Kuwait, was anxious about the safety of his family and returned to Sri Lanka last week.

“Every day I speak to my family and I contacted them in the morning, at around 10.30, one day after the attacks began. My wife said that there is no problem but then I learnt that there had been trouble in the area two hours later.” Rizvi called again but no one answered and he began crying in the shop where he was working in Kuwait.

“I eventually found out that my wife and two children, together with her sister-in-law and her two daughters, aged 8 and 2, were hiding in the bushes. They hid there for around three hours and were very scared,” he said.

“A Sinhala woman saw them and took them to her house even though her husband and daughter had gone to work. She was alone but courageously took them inside, gave them tea and food, closed all the doors and protected them.”

The terrifying situation facing Rizvi’s wife and children was typical of what happened to many Muslim people in the area.

WSWS reporters also spoke with Muslim residents in Digana. According to residents, the thugs brought an empty coffin and initiated their attack from a section of Digana known as New Town. A Buddhist monk was among the 500 perpetrators. One group drove to Kengalla and another attacked Muslim businesses and houses in the Digana area. Residents have accused police commandos of supporting the thugs.

Mohamed said, “This is a side road from Digana and we didn’t think they would come here so we didn’t even have time to hide. There were thousands of rupees worth of cigarettes and telephone re-charge cards, among other items, destroyed. The fridge and the TV were also damaged.”

Numbers of Digana residents have left their homes and temporarily moved to other locations. Fatima Bibi said: “We were living in peace with Sinhala civilians and they were very friendly with us. We don’t care what happened to the four [who attacked the Sinhala driver] but why were we attacked? Our son just started a small business and his office was attacked. The front door was broken.

“My daughter and her baby were at home at that time but they then hid in a safer place. Scared that their small daughter would cry, they closed her mouth with a piece of cloth.”

These communalist attacks are not aberrations but

follow a definite pattern. Fascistic organisations like Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Ravaya and Mahasohon Balakaya were promoted by President Mahinda Rajapakse when in power and have been appeased and nurtured by the current government.

On Saturday, the Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, along with his Sinhala and Muslim cabinet ministers, visited the destroyed and vandalised areas. He promised compensation for those affected and then presided over a meeting of ministers and various government bureaucrats. The meeting was told that 465 houses, shops and vehicles had been damaged—86 fully destroyed, 196 partially and 182 minimal—in the anti-Muslim pogrom.

Wickremesinghe feigned concern, declared that the violence was a “challenge” to tourism, an indication of where his real interests lie, and urged the Buddhist hierarchy to “educate the people about unity and co-existence.”

Wickremesinghe’s comments are dripping with cynicism and hypocrisy. No amount of commissions or political appeals will eliminate the root cause of the ongoing extremist violence.

The Buddhist hierarchy and successive governments have promoted anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism in order to divide and derail the working class and defend the power and privileges of the Sri Lankan ruling elite. The encouragement of these reactionary forces by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government and the Rajapakse-led opposition is in direct response to the deepening economic and political crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism.

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