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SRI LANKA - Hundreds Of Tamils Forcibly Expelled From Colombo

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In a blatantly illegal action on June 7, the Sri Lankan government ordered police to raid cheap boarding lodges in Colombo and forcibly evict Tamil residents from the capital. Police rounded up hundreds of ordinary Tamils at gunpoint, packed them into buses, drove them to the distant towns of Vavuniya in the North and Trincomalee in the East, and dumped them.

The pre-dawn raid was carried out without warning in the Pettah, Maradana, Kotahena and Wellawatta areas of Colombo. According to the police, 376 people-291 men and 85 women-were detained and dispatched to the North and East in eight buses. None were charged with any crime.

Inspector General of Police Victor Perera revealed the communal basis for the round-up, declaring it had been necessary to secure the "safety of innocent people living in Colombo and its suburbs". In other words, under conditions where the Colombo government is intensifying its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), all Tamils are being treated as the enemy. Two recent bomb blasts in Colombo, at Pettah and Ratmalana, have been blamed on the LTTE.

Police Deputy Inspector General in Colombo, Rohan Abeywardene, attempted to justify the expulsions by saying that the Tamils involved had "no valid reasons" to stay in Colombo. Abeywardene's comments raised the prospect that tens of thousands more Tamils, who are temporary residents of the capital, would also be expelled. There is, however, no basis in law requiring Sri Lankan citizens to obtain official approval to shift residence.

Speaking just hours after the round-up, the government's defence spokesman Kehaliya Rambukwella brushed aside criticisms and cynically told parliament that the security forces had only been facilitating the "voluntary departure" of Tamils.

Speaking to Sirasa TV, a Pettah lodge owner described what had happened: "The police and the army came early morning, at about 3.00 a.m. and took the people out from the rooms. There were about seven or eight people aged more than 65 years old. A lady, who was about 65 years, cried and lamented and knelt before the police officers and pleaded not to send her back. They didn't care [about] that and there were another four elderly women and four elderly men.

"There was one who returned after days in an intensive care unit of Colombo hospital and he showed his medical reports to the police. But they didn't even look at them and he too was taken away. We don't know the real purpose but the police said no one could stay for more than two weeks in Colombo."

The Daily Mirror reported on June 8 that among those forcibly carted off was a 23-year-old Tamil girl, who was staying in a lodge with her aged mother, waiting to get married. They had booked a reception hall for the ceremony in a week's time. She was expecting her bridegroom to arrive from London. Despite producing a receipt issued by the reception hall owners, police said they had "no valid reason" to stay in Colombo and ordered them to return to Karaweddi in Jaffna. They complained that they had nowhere to live in Karaweddi, as their properties had been mortgaged to cover the wedding expenses.

The expulsions provoked widespread outrage in Sri Lanka and internationally. Five organisations, including the Centre for Human Rights and Development, Centre for Policy Alternatives and Free Media Movement, issued a statement on June 7 declaring that the police round-up was a flagrant violation of "right to choose their residence and freedom of movement".

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Uproar erupted in parliament after MPs belonging to the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance demanded a debate over the round-up. Jaffna District MP Suresh Premachandran threatened to quit parliament if the expulsions were not stopped.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP) also felt compelled to make a protest, comparing the government's treatment of Tamils to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. Even the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is notorious for its anti-Tamil chauvinism, described the government's actions as "high handed and foolish". The UNP was responsible for launching the country's bloody civil war in 1983. The JVP is currently demanding the government launch all-out war against "Tiger terrorism".

So naked was the communal character of the police round-up that the US and India, which have tacitly backed President Mahinda Rajapakse's war against the LTTE, issued hypocritical criticisms. The US embassy declared that it "understands and supports Sri Lanka's obligation to defend itself against terrorism" but "this action can only widen the ethnic divide". An Indian High Commission spokeswoman expressed New Delhi's "concern" about the eviction of Tamils.

On June 8, the Centre for Policy Alternatives challenged the government's decision by taking out a Fundamental Rights petition in the country's Supreme Court. The court issued an interim order directing the Inspector General of Police (IGP) "not to take any steps to evict Tamils from Colombo or to prevent them from entering and staying in any part of Colombo". The order did not, however, extend to the 376 people who had been expelled already.

In a bid to contain the political fall-out, President Rajapakse sought to make the country's police chief the scapegoat for the decision. He called on IGP Perera, one of the president's own appointees, to provide an explanation for his actions and to return to Colombo all those who had been expelled. Only 186 have been brought back. The remainder, obviously terrified by the experience, returned to their towns and villages in the North and East.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremesinghe stepped in to try to shield President Rajapakse. "I express regret regarding the shifting of people from here to various other places. That should never have been done," he said. "The government accepts responsibility."

This transparent attempt at political damage control should fool no one. The expulsion of hundreds of innocent Tamils from Colombo is a logical product of the communal war, which Rajapakse has restarted and been waging since he narrowly won the presidency in November 2005. The government has reimposed tough security laws allowing the arbitrary detention without trial of "terrorist suspects," giving the security forces wide powers to harass and persecute Tamils.

At the same time, hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, have been murdered or "disappeared" in circumstances that clearly implicate the military and associated paramilitaries. The Tamil media and journalists have been particular targets of these pro-government death squads. Virtually no one has been arrested or charged over any of these incidents, leading international human rights organisations to accuse the government of sanctioning a climate of impunity.

While Rajapakse claims to be waging a "war on terror" against the LTTE, the persecution of ordinary Tamils underscores the real purpose of the protracted war, which is to maintain the political and economic dominance of the island's Sinhala ruling elites. Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe have only stepped back from their latest repressive measure because it threatens to trigger protests at home and undermine support from the international backers of the war-the Bush administration in particular.