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Sri Lankan government deploys military, defends police shooting of protesters

Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government are justifying the police opening fire this week on thousands of unarmed people protesting fuel price hikes. The police attack, which occurred on Tuesday in Rambukkana, about 95 kilometres northeast of Colombo, killed K.B. Chaminda Lakshan and injured about two dozen others.

The Rambukkana protests erupted over delayed petrol deliveries and sharp new price increases in petrol and diesel announced on Monday. On Tuesday demonstrators blocked main highways and a railway line. Police began directing tear gas at thousands of protesters in the afternoon and then suddenly, without warning, opened fire with live rounds.

Lakshan, a 40-year-old father of two from Naranbedda, a village near Rambukkana, was shot. He died soon after being admitted to Kegalle hospital. A police curfew imposed over the whole area on Tuesday evening was lifted yesterday morning.



Sri Lankans hold up their mobile phone torches during a vigil condemning police shooting at protesters in Rambukkana, 90 kilometers (55 miles) northeast of Colombo, Sri Lanka, Tuesday, April 19, 2022. (AP Photo/Eranga Jayawardena)

The Rambukkana protest was part of the ongoing anti-government demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of working people and youth that have swept across the island over the past two weeks. The struggles are a response to spiralling inflation, shortages of essentials, including food, medicine and fuel, and extended daily power outages.

The Sri Lankan government is attempting to impose the burden of the unprecedented economic crisis produced by the pandemic and the Ukrainian war crisis on the working class and the rural and urban poor. The nationwide demonstrations are demanding the immediate resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, with around 10,000 people gathered in Colombo's Galle Face Green as the main protest centre.

Lakshan's funeral is being held today amid a huge military mobilisation aimed at trying to intimidate the population. Using his power under the Public Security Ordinance, President Rajapakse on Wednesday night called on the army, navy, and air force to assist police to "maintain order" in Rambukkana and adjacent areas in the Kegalle district until April 23.

In a Wednesday night Twitter message, Rajapakse cynically claimed he was "deeply saddened" by the Rambukkana incident while adding, "I urge all citizens to refrain from violence as they protest."



Chaminda Lakshan (Photo: Facebook)

Echoing this, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse declared he was “deeply distressed following the tragedy in Rambukkana” and said there would be “a strict, impartial investigation.” The police, he added, have “always served Sri Lanka with utmost honour.” In a thinly-veiled threat, Rajapakse demanded that protesters “engage in their civic right with equal respect and honour.”

This followed a chilling national address last week in which Prime Minister Rajapakse “reminded” Sri Lankans how Colombo had crushed anti-government protests in the 1980s and deployed massive military force against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during a decades-long communal war.

Prasanna Ranatunga, Sri Lanka's minister for public security, directly condemned the Rambukkana protesters, telling parliament that the police had opened fire as a "last resort." He repeated false police claims that agitators had attempted to set fire to a petrol tanker, which, he claimed, could have resulted in a bigger disaster.

The Rajapakse government has appointed several committees to investigate what happened at Rambukkana. Inspector General of Police (IGP) Chandana Wickremaratne quickly declared there would be a police inquiry headed by a senior superintendent. Yesterday he announced that the Criminal Investigation Department would conduct another investigation.

The public security ministry has also appointed an Independent Board of Inquiry, while another is to be held by the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission, a legally toothless body.

As in the past, these inquiries will be a sham, aimed at downplaying and covering-up the police brutality. If they are unable to hide the truth, these inquiries will try to find one or two scapegoats.

False claims about violent demonstrations or protesters blocking transport are being used by the government to justify its mobilisation of the military.

Chief of Defence Staff and Commander of the Army General Shavendra Silva has issued a statement declaring that army and other military forces have been deployed since April 20 to "assist unhindered passage of transport movements" following a request from the Inspector General of Police. The military is currently providing "protection" to oil tanker trucks.

Silva said the military had "not to-date caused any hindrance" to anti-government protests. However, he falsely added, "a few elements, who have shown up at those places were seen in the past few days engaged in particularly blocking road movements, causing inconvenience to the general public and transport of fuel supplies and essentials to different island-wide areas."

In a media statement, Wickremaratne claimed that the police had to use “minimum force” to stop a group attempting to set fire to a tanker with 30,000 litres of fuel during the Rambukkana protest and to prevent major damage.

Numerous eyewitnesses in Rambukkana have rejected Wickremaratne’s claims that protesters had attempted to set fire to the tanker and that “minimum force” was used. The police official has not explained how the use of live ammunition constituted “minimum force.” Reports are now emerging about the brutal police attack on unarmed people.

Dr. Shenal Fernando, secretary of the Government Medical Officers Association, told the media that union members had revealed that 15 people had been admitted to Kegalle hospital surgical wards with injuries caused by live ammunition. Three people were being treated in the hospital’s intensive care unit (ICU), with one patient in a critical condition.

The ICU patients included a 37-year-old man with injuries to his abdominal cavity, a 40-year-old man with chest and abdominal cavity wounds, and an 18-year-old boy with abdominal cavity injuries.

A Kegalle hospital doctor told the *World Socialist Web Site* that all the injured patients had been shot from behind, above the knee and whilst running. Lakshan was admitted with a cardiopulmonary resuscitation situation, i.e., he was dying. Lakshan had worked as a cook and earned additional income by supplying fodder for domesticated elephants.

An eyewitness at Tuesday’s Rambukkana protest said drivers had gathered at the fuel distribution centre on Monday evening because its manager had told them a tanker would arrive there by midnight and that fuel would be dispensed the next morning.

“There had been around 500 vehicles parked along both sides of the road outside the gas station,” the eyewitness said. They started protesting, he said, when the tanker did not turn up and the next morning blocked the main Kegalle-Rambukkana road and then the railway line.

“A tanker arrived at the gas station at around 10 am on Tuesday but people found out that there was not sufficient fuel. They continued to protest but it was not violent. In the afternoon, police started firing tear gas and started shooting,” he said.

Another eyewitness told a Colombo television news report that police spokesmen were lying. People were “not even armed with a razor blade, let alone attacking the fuel tanker,” he said. The police attacked unarmed innocent protesters who had earlier even provided them with lunch, he added.

“Day by day the government is terrorising people,” he said. “They’re blaming innocent people who have anxiously queued for days to buy petrol or diesel.”

The violent police attack in Rambukkana, a decision taken at the highest levels of the Rajapakse government, is a clear indication that state repression is being prepared on a far broader and more violent level.

In order to defend its basic democratic and social rights, including the right to protest, the working class needs its own democratic organisations. This is why the SEP calls for the formation of action committees in every workplace, factory and working-class suburb, democratically elected and independent of every capitalist party.

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