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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By our correspondents

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Anti-Muslim witch-hunt after terrorist bombings in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan government has unleashed a crackdown, mainly targeting Muslims, following the horrific April 21 bomb attacks on three Catholic churches and three hotels that killed more than 250 men, women and children, and injured some 500 more.

The government immediately seized upon the attack to impose draconian emergency regulations and deploy thousands of security and police officers. The opposition parties and the media have aligned themselves with the government's campaign.

The fact that the attack was apparently carried out by the Islamic fundamentalist ISIS, in coordination with the Sri Lankan Muslim extremist group, Thowheeth Jamma'ath, is being used to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment.

President Maithripala Sirisena declared that under the emergency laws, house-to-house checks would be carried out, similar to the operations conducted during Colombo's communal war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Hundreds of people have been arrested, with many later released. On Monday, police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekera said 73 persons had been detained and were under police interrogation.

In another operation, a Colombo magistrate released nine of the 16 workers arrested from a factory in Colombo's suburbs. The police claimed they suspected the factory had been used to manufacture bombs for the attacks. The magistrate released the workers when police failed to file any specific charges against them.

Reports have appeared of police finding explosives, swords, incriminating literature and suspicious places in many parts of the country, showing the widespread nature of the police operations.

President Sirisena amended the emergency regulations last week to include a ban on wearing face-covering cloths—that is burqas and niqabs, the traditional attire of Muslim women. It follows bans on the wearing of burqas in several European countries that were used to incite anti-Muslim hostility.

After the April bomb attacks, over 1,000 Muslim refugees sheltered in Negombo, compelled to flee their houses because of threats by Sinhala mobs. Some were subjected to physical attack. Having previously fled from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, they are now living temporarily in mosques and police stations.

Tariq Ahmed, a 58-year-old Pakistani from the Ahamadyya community, told the Associated Press: “The people in Pakistan attacked us and say we’re not Muslims. Then in Sri Lanka, people attack us because they say we are Muslims.”

People who spoke to the WSWWS expressed outrage over the targeting of innocent people. Many were conscious that the ruling elite was seeking to strengthen its repressive measures and divide working people along ethnic lines.

A teacher from Chilaw said: “Whoever did this crime [the terrorist bombings], only ordinary people are suffering. We cannot go onto the streets. We cannot go to the hospital. Everyone looks at us with suspicion. However, we have no problem from the Catholic people in our village and live with harmony.”

Citing the arrival of an FBI group to “assist” investigations into the attacks, she said the US had exploited the situation to its advantage. “It was the US which invaded the Middle East and destroyed those societies,” she said.

The teacher was also aware that the government and the trade unions are trying to use the emergency to suppress workers’ struggles. Referring to a one-day teachers’ protest in March, she said: “All the teachers, including the Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils, went on strike to win our wage demand. The unions are now completely silent regarding the wage struggle and other issues for teachers.”

A young engineer said he had worked at a private firm after finishing his degree but resigned because of the low wages. “Now, it is difficult to find a job, because I am a Muslim. There are comments on social media saying that all Muslim people are terrorists.”

Many Muslims were arrested in a police search operation at Dharga Town near Aluthgama in the Kaluthara district. In June 2014, Muslims in this area faced attacks by thugs provoked by the extremist Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Brigade), in which two Muslims were killed.

One person in the area told the WSWS: “The extremists use terrorist attacks to incite racism but we live in harmony. I can remember that Sinhala Buddhists opposed the attack on us in 2014. I oppose terrorism. Problems cannot be resolved through such means.”

He said that both he and his father had previously bought saffron robes and bowls from temples and sold them to wholesale shops, but some of the traders had now been arrested. He said it was an attempt to incite Buddhists against Muslims by claiming that Muslims were keeping the robes to wear them and attack temples.

A group of people explained that the security forces and media created a provocation against Muslims. They said a youth at Snapula Road was arrested because he had 18 identity cards issued by various companies when he worked in the Middle East. Later, he was released.

One of the people explained: “The reason for arrest was that the details on the identity cards were in Arabic. He was taken to the [nearby] Welipitiya mosque and videoed, and the media reported that a person with 18 identity cards was arrested. They lied that mosques were related to terrorist activities.”

A Muslim woman at Snapula Road was arrested because she wore her traditional dress. She was released only after dozens of people intervened. In hospitals, visitors had been barred from entering when they wore a black dress or hijab.

A garment businessman commented: “Extremism is a political movement. My business has collapsed because of the collapse of the tourist industry. I supported the United National Party. Now I do not support any party. Those who have ruled the country for 70 years are responsible for this situation. Now people need an alternative.”

Residents at Sirimuthu Mahal at Grandpas and Laksanda at Salamulla—two “low income” apartment complexes in Colombo—said urban development authority officials had asked them to vacate their homes, citing “security reasons.” Officials cut the water supply to the Laksanda flats but restored it when residents held protests. Many of the residents are Muslims.

The security forces have also targeted the universities, where students have held continued protests against the privatisation of education and demanded better facilities. The Jaffna, Peradeniya, Vayamba and Ruhunu universities were among those where search operations by the security forces were carried out.

On May 4, the military raided Jaffna University and arrested the student union president, N. Diwakaran, and secretary, S. Badilraj. The spurious reason given for the arrest was the display in the union office of posters with the picture of V. Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader whom the military killed in 2009 when the LTTE was defeated.

Search operations have intensified in the military-occupied north and east of the island.

A broader picture is now unfolding. These developments confirm the Socialist Equality Party's warning following the April 21 attacks: The government's anti-Muslim propaganda and so-called fight against terrorism are to provide the pretext for creating a police-state and targeting workers, youth and poor engaged in protests and strikes against government austerity measures.

The working class must condemn and oppose the witch-hunt against Muslims and fight for the unity of Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil workers to defend democratic rights on the basis of the struggle for socialist policies.

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