

1956-1983

On 5 June 1956, over 150 people were estimated to have been killed in Colombo and in Gal Oya and Amparai, which were regions in the East under a new irrigation and resettlement scheme. They were attacked by members of the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna (a Buddhist group) and supporters of Sinhala only after 300 Tamils had staged a satyagraha (peaceful protest) against the introduction of the Sinhala only Bill in Parliament. The violence spread throughout Colombo and the East without the Police interfering, explaining that they had been ordered not to do so.

On 23rd May 1958, the second riot resulted in an estimated death toll of 1,000 Tamil people. The acts of violence were committed by Sinhalese mobs and were particularly severe in Colombo, Batticaloa, Polonnaruwa, Badulla, Kurunegala, Panadura, Galle and Matara. They were sparked off by a radio announcement during heightened tension that a Sinhalese had been killed by Tamils, and attacks on members of the Tamil Federal Party who were planning to stage a satyagraha against the abandoning of the Bandaranaike Chelvanayakam Pact.

The rioting, which took the form of stopping trains and buses and killing and injuring Tamil passengers, burning Tamil houses with people inside, raping of Tamil women and looting of Tamil property, went on for four days without the police interfering or the then Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike declaring a state of emergency. On 27th May, a state of emergency was proclaimed and the army came in to restore order; a task that included arresting and detaining about 150 Tamils, including the 10 MPs of the Federal Party.

“On the night of May 25, one of the most heinous crimes in the history of Ceylon was carried out.. The Tamil laborers in the Polonnaruwa sugar cane plantation fled when they saw the enemy approaching and hid in sugar cane bushes... The goondas wasted no time. They set the sugar cane alight and flushed out the Tamils. As they came out screaming, men, women and children were cut down with home-made swords, grasscutting knives and katties, or pulped under heavy clubs.

At the Government farm at Hingurakgoda, too, the Tamils were slaughtered that night. One woman in sheer terror embraced her two children and jumped into a well. The rioters were enjoying themselves thoroughly. They ripped open the belly of a woman eight months pregnant, and left her to bleed to death.

...A gang of goondas rushed into the Hindu temple and attempted to set fire to it. In their frenzy, they were clumsy and failed to get the fire going. But they had a more interesting idea. They pulled an officiating priest out of the kovil and burnt him to a cinder...”

Tarzie Vettachi in Emergency '58: The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots, London 1958.

In April 1961, at least one man was killed and numerous Tamils injured when government troops dispersed a non violent protest and fired on a crowd in Jaffna. 152 These incidents occurred during a state of emergency throughout Sri Lanka. Which the government of Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranaike had declared in March and April In response to a Tamil civil disobedience campaign launched by the Tamil Federal Party. This campaign was directed against the Sinhala only policy and called upon Tamil government employees and other Tamils not to study Sinhala, not to transact any business in Sinhala and to correspond with the government only in Tamil. In February and March, thousands of Tamils staged a satyagraha and blocked access to the district administrative headquarters in Jaffna. Vavuniya. Trincomalee and Batticaloa. The government responded by imposing a press censorship. cutting off food supplies and communications hulks from Jaffna to the rest of the island and a 48 hour curfew in the Northern province on April 18. Sinhalese troops were for the first time moved to Jaffna to break up the resistance. Mrs. Bandaranaike stated in April that the Federal Party had by its actions made it abundantly clear that the real objective was to establish a Separate state and that the government was in the face of continuing Tamil protest left with no other alternative but to use forces at its command to establish law and order. Consequently the army broke up the satyagraha by means of force and arrested 68 Tamils. mainly Tamil politicians. among them 15 MPs.