

Tamil Parliamentarians attacked by Sinhala mobs, 150 Tamils killed - 1956

By: Satchi Ponnambalam

On 5th June 1956, the date the 'Sinhala Only' Bill was introduced by (Prime Minister) Bandaranaike in the House (of Parliament), as an act of protest, Chelvanayakam, the leader of the Federal Party, led a party of 300 Tamil volunteers and staged a sit down Satyagraha (peaceful protest) of the kind popularised by Mahatma Gandhi in the days of the Indian freedom struggle.

It was a peaceful sit down protest outside the House, on the Galle Face Green... On that day, the police were all around but allowed the Satyagrahis to be beaten up... Some Tamil Satyagrahis were thrown into Beira Lake near the Parliament House. From that moment every Tamil seen on roads of Colombo was attacked. Tamil office employees going home from work in public transport were caught and man-handled. Tamils had to stay indoors for personal safety for days on end.

Sinhalese hooligans took charge of the situation and went on a rampage of arson and looting of Tamil shops and homes. The rioting and violence were instigated by the government and actively supported by the Sinhalese organisations and Bhikkus (Buddhist priests) to frighten Tamils into accepting the 'Sinhala Only' Act...

The violence and rioting spread to Gal Oya and Amparai where, under an irrigation and re-settlement scheme, thousands of Sinhalese had been resettled in clusters around thinly distributed Tamil villages in the Eastern province. In the race riots in 1956, 150 people died. They included many Tamil women and children..."

Source: Sri Lanka - The National Question and the Tamil Liberation