

NEWS

Fonseka arrested for plotting against government

THE arrest of the main opposition candidate at the recent presidential elections, General (retd) Sarath Fonseka, has drawn protests and condemnation from opposition parties in Sri Lanka, while the government claims it is now a matter for the courts.

Fonseka was arrested in a spectacular swoop on his political office by military police on the night of Monday 8 February.

The arrest as he was in discussion with political allies on challenging the presidential poll results and on campaign tactics for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

The retired General, who led the military onslaught against the Liberation Tigers between 2005 and 2010, had earlier in the day claimed that he was prepared to testify against anyone on war crimes in front of an international court.

The government has charged Fonseka with plotting, while he was in the military, to overthrow the incumbent regime.

The Military Police also charged him with conspiracy to assassinate President Rajapakse and making political moves while in military uniform.

Legal experts predict that the Sri Lankan military courts may attempt to pass a life sentence on Fonseka.

He was allegedly charged with attempting to topple the government by joining the opposition parties while serving in the post of Military General and Joint Forces Commanding Chief, attempting to divide the military, and for granting shelter to army deserters.

However, analysts speculate that the arrest may have had more to do with Fonseka's threats to assist prosecutions of war-crimes charges against senior members of the military and the Rajapakse family.

"I am not going to save anyone who has committed war crimes. I am definitely going to reveal what I know, what I was told and what I heard," Fonseka said, speaking to journalists on the morning of the day he was arrested. "Any one who has committed war crimes should definitely be brought into courts," he said, adding "Those who reveal the truth are not traitors."

Fonseka had earlier alleged that two of the President's brothers had been complicit in the killing of unarmed members of the Liberation Tigers who were surrendering - which is a war crime.

In an interview with The Sunday Leader newspaper Fonseka had implicated Defense

Secretary Gothabaya Rajapakse and Presidential advisor Basil Rajapakse in the incident in May 2009 when the LTTE political wing chief, B Nadesan, his deputy S Pulidevan and the LTTE police chief, Ramesh were killed with their families.

When the military police burst into his office, Fonseka was allegedly in a meeting with the leaders of Tamil and Muslim parties that had supported his presidential challenge.

Press reports said he was meeting Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Mano Ganesan, the leader of the Democratic People's Front (DPF) at their Colombo campaign headquarters to discuss challenging the results of the presidential poll. Other reports suggested that Somawansa Amarasinghe, the leader of the Sinhala nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was also present.

The Sri Lankan media reported that Fonseka resisted arrest, and as a result was dragged away.

Reports said that Major-General Sumith Manawadu had stormed in with a group of military policemen and ordered them to arrest the general and his aide Senaka da Silva.

"They stormed into the conference room while the meeting was going on and assaulted Mano Ganesan, he [Major-General Manawadu] punched him and then a dozen army people walked in," Mr Samaraweera told the Daily Telegraph.

"General Fonseka said 'this must be done by the police', at which point Manawadu punched Fonseka. The other armed fellows pinned him to the ground and dragged him by the legs. They carried him down the stairs and bundled him into a van along with his secretary. He was also assaulted," Mr Samaraweera said.

"He is retired, the military police can't arrest him, it must be under civil law. Until 2am General Fonseka's wife had no idea of his whereabouts, and we still don't know anything. You can't be assaulted and bundled into a car without a warrant," he added.

Those present at the meeting condemned the manner of the arrest and described it as disgraceful.

"He was dragged away in a very disgraceful manner in front of our own eyes," Rauff Hakeem told Reuters. Mano Ganesan claimed he was "dragged away like a dog". "There was no decorum. To call it an arrest gives dignity and legality to what was a brutal abduction. He was beaten, dragged along the floor and bundled into a

van," said opposition politician and Fonseka's campaign spokesperson Mangala Samaraweera.

Fonseka was taken to Navy Headquarters where he still remains without being charged while evidence is being put together in preparation for a General Court Martial.

Fonseka's wife Anoma gave a tearful statement to international media the day after his arrest, pleading for his release.

"This is not an arrest. It is an abduction," a tearful Anoma Fonseka told a news conference at her home in Colombo. Mrs Fonseka complained that her 59-year-old husband had been "dragged out and treated like an animal" by the soldiers after he objected to being arrested by military rather than civilian police.

"We always knew that the Government will try to arrest my

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Fonseka is being charged in military court for plotting a coup

Clashes, violence follow arrest

VIOLENT clashes between opposition supporters and government supporters backed by the police have followed the arrest of the main opposition candidate at the last presidential polls.

Demonstrations were organised across Sri Lanka to protest the arrest of General (retd) Sarath Fonseka on various charges including plotting to overthrow the government and planning the assassination of President Mahinda Rajapakse. There was a broad coalition of support for the protesters, with organizers including the Sinhala nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the main parliamentary opposition United National Party (UNP) and the Buddhist clergy.

Clashes were reported in at least 3 cities, including Colombo, where the first reports of violence came from two days after Fonseka's arrest.

In Colombo, eye-witnesses reports of around 50 government supporters attacking a group of 2,500 opposition supporters with stones and bottles, resulting in a number of injuries, were carried by local media.

Protestors were also seen attacking the police personnel, reports said, adding that iron rods, clubs and stones were being used.

Journalists at the scene said they saw clubs being unloaded from a car to attack the protesters.

The press reports said that when the demonstrators retaliated, the police intervened and fired

tear gas and water cannons to break up the crowds. Police leniency against violent government supporters was obvious, the eye-witnesses said.

"They stoned us and attacked with clubs and even threw glass bottles at us in front of the police," one woman told Reuters news agency.

"Police are beating the protesters with batons," said a Reuters photographer at the scene of the protest in a Colombo suburb.

In Maharagama, Kandy and other parts of the south, the police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse protests, the press reports said.

Locals have expressed concern over the possibility of further clashes when the case against Fonseka's arrest is heard later in February.

Meanwhile, Britain and the United States have expressed concerns over the general's treatment since his hotel was surrounded by army troops after his election defeat last month, the Daily Telegraph newspaper reported. But there has been little official reaction to the arrest.

But the Buddhist clergy has had a mixed response to the arrest, with different chapters taking varying positions.

The Mahanayaka of Malwatte Chapter initially said he was awaiting a response from the president, saying that Rajapakse "could have been in dark" while the arrest took place. But the

Mahanayaka of Asgiriya Chapter deplored the sudden arrest of Fonseka.

The clergy, who were due to hold a meeting to discuss the arrest on 18 February, postponed the meeting. The monks were due to discuss a strategy for pressing the government to release Fonseka, but cancelled the meeting citing government pressure, reported AFP.

The gathering at the Temple of the Tooth in the central city of Kandy was called off a day before the meeting, with the monks citing concerns for their safety in the "current political climate".

One of their spokesmen, Athangane Ratanapala, said the paramount Buddhist cleric, Thibbotuwawe Sumangala, had been subjected to "severe stress" ahead of the scheduled gathering, reported AFP.

"Many individuals representing the government as well as some members of the clergy who are working for the government used tremendous pressure on us to stop our meeting," he said.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe went further, telling reporters in Colombo that specific threats had been made. "They had been told that there could be bomb blasts at the Temple of the Tooth if they go ahead with the meeting," Wickremesinghe said.

There was no immediate comment from the government, which has maintained that it was not influencing the clergy.