

Rajapaksa ally named PM

Swearing-in comes just hours after security forces raid protest site

COLOMBO: Senior Sri Lankan lawmaker Dinesh Gunawardena was sworn in as the new prime minister, his office said, a day after the swearing-in of a new president as the Indian Ocean nation grapples with its worst economic crisis in decades:

The event came just hours after security forces raided a protest camp on government grounds in the main city of Colombo and cleared part of it, with at least nine arrests, as the new administration moves to crack down on protesters.

The overnight raid occurred even though protesters had announced they would vacate the site yesterday voluntarily, as the United Nations, United States and others denounced the heavy-handed force that was used.

A lawyer said several protesters were hospitalised for injuries and that journalists and a lawyer were among people arrested.

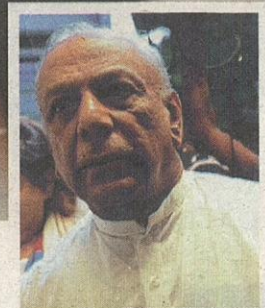
Sri Lankans have taken to the streets for months demanding their leaders resign over an economic crisis that has left the island nation's 22 million people short of essentials like medicine, food and fuel. Last week, the protests forced out former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, whose family has ruled Sri Lanka for most of the last two decades.

Ranil Wickremesinghe was elected president by lawmakers, and he appointed as his own successor his schoolmate Gunawardena, who is 73 and from a prominent political family.

On Monday, when he was acting president, Wickremesinghe declared a state of emergency giving him the power to change or suspend laws and giving authorities broad power to search premises



Heavy-handed: Security personnel standing guard next to a barricade near the Presidential Secretariat after a raid on a protest camp hours after Gunawardena (inset) was sworn in as prime minister of Sri Lanka. — Reuters



and detain people.

Yesterday he issued a notice under the state of emergency calling out the armed forces to maintain law and order nationwide.

Before dawn, troops and police cleared the main protest camp near the presidential palace in the capital, Colombo, where demonstrators have gathered for the past 104 days.

Army and police staff arrived in trucks and buses around midnight,

removing tents and blocking roads leading to the site.

The Bar Association called for a halt to the "unjustified and disproportionate actions" of armed forces targeting civilians. It called on Wickremesinghe to ensure he and his government respected the rule of law and citizens' rights.

"The use of the Armed Forces to suppress civilian protests on the very first day in office of the new President is despicable and will

have serious consequences on our country's social, economic and political stability," the association said in its statement.

Earlier this week, Wickremesinghe said bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund were near a conclusion and talks on help from other countries had also progressed.

He also said the government has taken steps to resolve shortages of fuel and cooking gas. — Agencies