

SRI LANKA PROTEST CAMP RAIDED

Many fear crackdown by new president following raid by security forces

COLOMBO

SRI Lankan security forces raided a protest camp occupying government grounds here early yesterday and cleared out a section of it, fuelling fears that President Ranil Wickremesinghe had launched a crackdown a day after being sworn in.

Media footage showed soldiers in riot gear and armed with assault rifles tearing down the camp, set up in April by protesters enraged with the country's economic collapse that has caused severe shortages of fuel, food and medicines.

Wickremesinghe, the former prime minister, was sworn into office on Thursday after winning a parliamentary vote this week, following the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa who fled to Singapore in the wake of massive public protests triggered by the country's worst economic crisis in seven decades.

Protesters had feared a crackdown was imminent as Wickremesinghe imposed a state of emergency in the country from Monday when he was the acting head of state, and many among them regarded him as an ally of Rajapaksa.

Another Rajapaksa ally, senior lawmaker Dinesh Gunawardena, took the oath as Sri Lanka's new prime minister just hours after security forces moved against the protest camp. The rest of the cabinet was expected to be sworn yesterday, with Wickremesinghe expected to keep the finance portfolio.

Gunawardena took the oath of office in the presence of Wickremesinghe, seated in front of uniformed military officers in a room packed with lawmakers and officials.

"A joint operation involving the



Protesters shouting slogans after soldiers forcibly evicted protesters from the president's secretariat premises in Colombo, Sri Lanka, yesterday. AGENCIES PIX

military, police and police special forces was launched in the early hours to recover the presidential secretariat from the protesters as they have no legal right to hold it," police spokesman Nalin Thalduwa said.

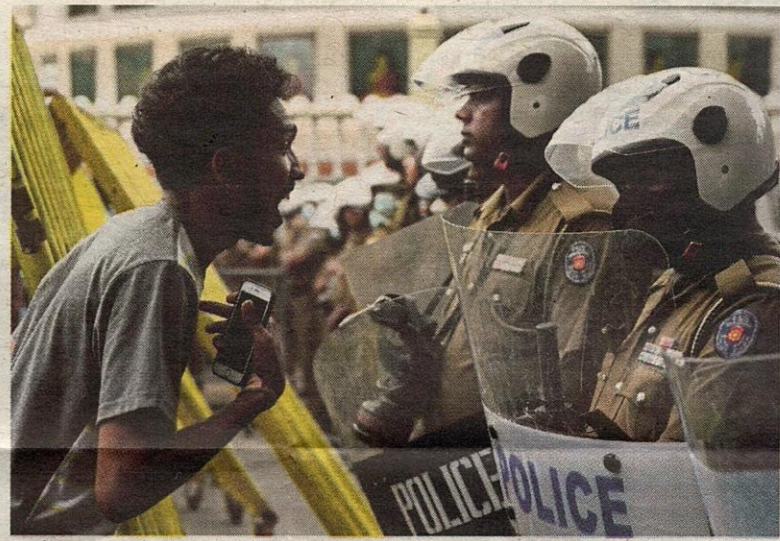
"Nine people, including two injured, have been arrested."

Angry at the pre-dawn raids, hundreds of protesters marched from the city's main railway station towards the Galle Face protest site, where they were held back by military and riot police manning barricades.

"The very first day he used the armed forces, this is the face of Ranil Wickremesinghe," said Rajeevkanth Rajkumar, chief executive office of a construction company and one of the protesters. "We don't want any more innocent people to be injured. But we will go to that place (the protest site) at any cost."

Opposition politician Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who lost the vote for the presidency, said on Twitter: "Let's bring down the brutal...regime that viciously attacked the protesters at Galle Face."

Protest organisers said hundreds of security personnel sur-



Police standing guard while blocking a road towards the Presidential secretariat office, as demonstrators take part in a protest march against Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe in Colombo yesterday.

rounded the "Gota Go Gama" protest camp, mockingly named after Rajapaksa, after midnight and then took apart a section of it.

At least 50 protesters were injured, the organisers said, including some journalists who were beaten by security forces. Hos-

pital sources said two were hospitalised.

"They beat us really cruelly," said Buddhika Abeyrathne, 34, a protester who witnessed the raid but did not appear injured himself. "Mr Wickremesinghe doesn't know what democracy is." **Reuters**