

Human Rights Watch demands release of Tamil socialists held by the LTTE

Our reporter
24 September 1998

The campaign to win the release of five members of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka being held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has won important new support. On September 21, Sidney Jones, executive director of the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, faxed a letter to LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran demanding the SEP members be immediately freed. On September 23 a fax was also sent by Carlo Carli, a member of the Victoria State parliament in Australia, calling for the safe return of the SEP members and an end to repression against the Socialist Equality Party.

The following is the text of the fax sent by Human Rights Watch:

Dear Mr. Prabhakaran,

Nearly two months have passed since the first two members of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka were arrested by the LTTE for attempting to engage in independent political organizing. Thirugnana Sambandan and Kasinathan Naguleshwaran, were arrested as they put up posters in Killinochchi on the evening of July 26, 1998. Rajendran Sudharshan was taken from his home August 2; A. Rasaratnam and E. Nayalvale were picked up on August 31.

Human Rights Watch was relieved to hear that the SEP in Colombo had received word on September 19 that three of these prisoners may have been released, but we remain concerned about the fate of the other detainees. Political arrests of this type are a clear violation of the fundamental rights of freedom of associations and expression. By refusing to acknowledge the detentions, the LTTE resorted to 'disappearances' not unlike those perpetrated against their own supporters by members of the Sri Lankan security forces.

We urge that the remaining SEP prisoners and all

others currently held in LTTE custody for the peaceful expression of their political beliefs be freed immediately. At the very least we call on the LTTE to allow their families and the International Committee of the Red Cross immediate access to the detainees to ensure that they are indeed alive and being treated humanely.

Sincerely,

Sidney Jones Executive Director Asia Division

On Tuesday, September 22 the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka held a press conference in Colombo announcing it had received information that three of its members had been released by the LTTE. SEP General Secretary Wije Dias reported that the SEP had received a letter signed by Rajendran Sudharshan and Thirugnana Sambandan stating that they and Kasinathan Naguleshwaran, another SEP member, had been released unconditionally and apparently unharmed on September 13.

Dias stated: 'The SEP views this as a very encouraging development. If the facts reported in these letters are true, it should be possible to bring this sorry episode--in which the LTTE has persecuted members of the socialist party that has spearheaded the struggle against Sinhalese chauvinism and the 15-year racist war against the Tamil population in the north and east of Sri Lanka--to a speedy and just conclusion.'

Dias added that although the letters appeared to be authentic, the information they contained needed independent verification. 'Also, we need to establish that all three comrades are in good health and that none of them was harmed in any way. Finally, we remain greatly concerned over the fate of the other two SEP members who remain in the LTTE's custody.' Asked at the press conference whether the international defense campaign would continue, Dias insisted, 'Yes. We will

not relent until we have confirmation of the release of all our members.'

In order to determine their health and the details of their arrest and captivity, the SEP is also calling on the LTTE to allow the SEP to establish direct contact with its freed members by allowing an SEP representative to visit Killinochchi, or permit one of the newly liberated detainees to travel to Colombo.

The five Tamil socialists were arrested in Killinochchi, just south of the Jaffna Peninsula that is controlled by the LTTE, a secessionist guerrilla organization. Thirugnana Sambandan and Kasinathan Naguleswaran were apprehended by LTTE security forces on the evening of July 26, while they posted SEP handbills. Rajendran Sudharshan was seized from his home August 1. A. Rasaratnam and E. Nayalvale were taken into LTTE custody August 31, shortly after the SEP leadership in Colombo received a report from Killinochchi that the LTTE was systematically hunting down all SEP members in the area.

The arrest and detention of the SEP members is a clear case of political repression. Relatives of Samabandan and Naguleswaran, the two members seized July 26, were told by an LTTE official that the arrests had taken place because the SEP's political work--in other words, its fight for a socialist-internationalist perspective--was an obstacle to the LTTE. To date, the LTTE leadership-in-exile in London has failed to even acknowledge the arrests of the SEP members, or give any explanation for their detention or report on their condition.

On September 11, the well-known human rights group Amnesty International issued a statement urging all members and supporters of its Urgent Action Network to pressure the LTTE to provided assurances that its SEP captives not be ill-treated or tortured, allow representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross and relatives to visit them, and clarify the reasons for their detention.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges all labor and human rights organizations, and those groups and individuals concerned with upholding democratic rights, to continue to press the LTTE for the immediate and unconditional release of all SEP members in its custody.

Letters of protest should be faxed to the LTTE c/o Eelam House (London) at: 44-171-403-1653 Tel.:

44-171-403-4554

Statements can also be mailed to:

The LTTE c/o Eelam House 202 Long Lane London SE1 4QB United Kingdom

Please send copies of all statements of protest to the WSWS at:

E-mail: editor@wsws.org Fax: (US) 248-967-3023

See Also:

Colombo press conference called to demand release of all SEP members

Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party cites reports that LTTE has released three Tamil socialists

[23 September 1998]

Statement of SEP (Sri Lanka) General Secretary Wije Dias on status of Tamil socialists held by the LTTE

[23 September 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact