

"International campaign secured our release"

Sri Lankan socialists detained by the LTTE speak out

30 December 1998

The following interview is with two of the four members of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka who were illegally detained by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam last summer in the LTTE-controlled area of Kilinochchi. Only a vigorous international defence campaign waged by the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International secured their release.

Thirugnana Sambandan, Kasinathan Naguleshwaran and Rajendran Sudharshan were freed September 13 after almost 50 days in captivity. Rasarapnam Rajavale was released September 16 after 17 days' detention.

Thirugnana Sambandan and Rajendran Sudharshan were interviewed by S. Rajendran, when they travelled to Colombo earlier this month.

Q: What were you doing when you were apprehended by the LTTE?

Sambandan: On the evening of July 26, I and another comrade, Kasinathan Naguleshwaran, were pasting handwritten posters. They contained the slogans: 'No to the racist war! Withdraw Sri Lankan armies from the North and East! Build the unity of the Tamil-Sinhala working class!' Sudharshan was arrested at his home on August 2.

Q: How long have you been fighting for the program of the Socialist Equality Party?

Sudharshan: We came in contact with the Revolutionary Communist League, the predecessor of the SEP, in the early 1990s after obtaining a copy of *Tholilalar Pathai* [*Workers Path* --the Tamil language newspaper of the RCL/SEP]. The paper impressed us so we discussed its contents among our friends in Killinochchi--poor peasants, fishermen and youth.

Q: After your arrest, the LTTE leader in Kilinochchi, Theepan, said the LTTE had known you were working with the SEP for the past years. The LTTE claims, and military analysts in the South concede, that the LTTE has a very extensive and efficient intelligence apparatus. Why did the LTTE not take action against you before this summer?

Sambandan: It is true that the LTTE has a successful record of obtaining information about the military plans of the Sri Lankan regime. This is because of the regime's crisis. We are different. We are a revolutionary organisation and have been conscious and careful about our security because we know about the LTTE's treatment of its political opponents. Of course, the LTTE would have seen our posters before. But they could not have known the individuals who pasted the posters. Theepan's statement was an idle boast.

Moreover, the LTTE has not been able simply to jump on us as they pleased, because our political line left no room for confusion as to our socialist-internationalist perspective.

We have fought against the racist war the Sri Lankan state has waged against the Tamil people on the basis of three main slogans: 'Withdraw the Sri Lankan armed forces from North and East! Stop the war! Build the Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic!' This clearly differentiates the SEP from the bankrupt nationalist and former leftist groups that are collaborating with the Colombo regime.

Q: Can you outline the development of the Tamil struggle against national oppression since the LTTE endorsed the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord?

Sambandan: All the Tamil nationalist groups, without exception, placed their hopes in the Indian ruling class. Only when the real reactionary aims of the Indian government and the state government in Tamil Nadu had become very clear to the masses, due to the repressive role of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), did the LTTE shift its line.

Then the LTTE's ex-deputy leader Mahaththaya and its top political adviser Anton Balasingham began talks with the Sri Lankan government of Premadasa. Later it came to light that the LTTE received arms and funding from the regime in Colombo, which, for its own reasons, now wanted to scrap the 1987 accord. Ultimately, the IPKF was forced to leave the country. Then, in June 1990, the United National Party regime launched its second war against the masses of Eelam, but the offensive soon failed and the LTTE emerged with most of the North under its control.

In the 1994 general elections, the LTTE supported the election of the Peoples Alliance regime of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, while we in the SEP warned that the PA's promises of peace were utterly bogus and that it would uphold the oppression of the Tamil and Sinhalese masses alike.

Since the collapse of the 'peace' talks and the launching of the 'Rivirasa' military operation in April 1995, the people in the North have faced unprecedented and virtually unrelenting terror. The Sri Lankan military has presided over mass disappearances of civilians in areas that have fallen under its control, while the LTTE forced some 450,000 people to flee Jaffna for the Vanni region (in which Kilinochchi is located.)

When the LTTE forced the masses to flee to the Vanni, they described it as similar to a visit to the 'younger daughter' of the family and gave pledges to the people of food, employment, and a safe and speedy return to Jaffna.

Instead more than half a million refugees have had to survive--not for months, but for years--in this backward rural district. In order to build huts they had to clear the forest, but subsequently many of the small huts were destroyed by elephants who had been deprived of their forest habitat.

People also were settled beyond the Killinochchi urban limits--in the areas of Oddusudan, Iranaimadu, Mulangavil, Akkarayan and Nachchikuda--where no facilities for health services or decent housing existed. In the absence of basic health and sewage facilities, these areas became haunts of malaria and other diseases.

Such is the popular anger over the LTTE's role in forcing the evacuation of Jaffna and the conditions they have presided over in the Vanni that the LTTE's political adviser Anton Balasingham has had to make a public apology.

To understand the conditions the masses face under the LTTE rule, one could cite their tax system. They collect water tax from even poor peasants and charge 1,000 rupees tax per acre of land. Even the poor peasants who owned less than one acre have not been spared. Even before the Rivirasa military offensive, peasants were banned from taking paddy they produced in Killinochchi area to Jaffna, the main market in the North. Peasants so hated the LTTE's tax system and monopoly on paddy

purchase, they refused at one point to sell paddy to the LTTE

The poor fishermen have been subjected to similar exploitation by the LTTE. Export quality lobsters and prawns are purchased for a few rupees by the LTTE controlled Fishermen Co-operative Society, enabling it to earn profits of 300 to 500 percent.

Q: How have the peasants, fishermen, and youth reacted to the political work of the SEP?

Sudharshan: The poor sections of society have gradually lost faith in the LTTE. Despite the attacks it has carried out against the Sri Lankan military, the LTTE are no longer seen as the liberators of the masses. People have begun to see the relevance of what we are saying--that the Tamil and Sinhalese workers and peasants have common enemies and must wage a joint struggle. Although what the Tamils of the Vanni have been able to witness of our political work is limited, they recognise we are providing an alternative perspective and program.

Q: How did the LTTE treat you during your captivity?

Sambandan: At first we were kept in a room at their Tharmapuram camp, with our hands tied behind our backs with pieces of wire and our legs chained. The pain to our hands was acute and we could not even move about to urinate. When we asked the LTTE guards to loosen our hands as they had begun to swell because of lack of blood circulation, they refused, declaring: 'You asked for socialism. This is the socialism you get.'

Later on, because of our persistent demands, they loosened the ties and unchained us when we needed to urinate.

After interrogating us on the July 27 about everything from our date of birth to the present party political work we were taken to another camp and pushed into separate cages, six feet by six feet.

There, LTTE leaders and cadres tried to taunt us, by demanding to know what the SEP has done for the liberation of the Tamils. We explained that we are fighting to build an independent working class movement to force the withdrawal of Sri Lankan security forces from the North and East as part of the struggle for socialism. We have fought for the release of all the political prisoners unconditionally and against the Prevention of Terrorism Act and Emergency Laws--democratic demands intimately relevant to both the Sinhalese and Tamil masses.

At one time or another, almost all the LTTE leaders made the following statement: 'Under Sinhalese leadership you can't achieve the rights of the Tamils.' To this we replied that the SEP is not a nationalist party of the Sinhalese. It is a socialist party that fights to unite all the workers in the Sri Lankan state and is part of a world party and a world working class leadership.

Q: Do you see any connection between the removal, several days after your arrest, of the handcuffs and fetters on your legs, and the SEP's and ICFI's launching of an international campaign for your release?

Sambandan: Currently, the LTTE's main campaign is for recognition by the 'International Community,' by which they mean recognition by the ruling classes of the imperialist powers. The LTTE leadership came to fear that our international campaign was cutting across these efforts by discrediting them in progressive and working class circles. They feared that their supporters in different countries, from among the Tamils and the democratic-minded opponents of the chauvinist policies of the Sri Lankan state, would learn of the repressive nature of the LTTE's regime and ask why it was repressing a socialist party with a decades-long record of defending the Tamils' democratic rights.

Due to the globalisation of production and trade, the working class and oppressed masses are being brought closer together, creating new possibilities for united class actions. In an interview with the BBC, a Tamil comrade confidently stated that with the support of the international working class the ICFI would secure the release of the SEP members.

LTTE supporters in exile issued a threat against our campaign through the Internet. But they could not take their counter-campaign forward, as the truth about the SEP's struggle against the Sri Lankan state and in

defence of the Tamils' democratic rights was brought to workers and intellectuals by the cadre of our world movement, working through the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The LTTE couldn't depict us as agents of PLOTE [Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam] or TELO [Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation] or any other group functioning as mercenaries and auxiliaries of the Sri Lankan military. Thoughtful sections of the masses are familiar with the RCL/SEP's record of struggle. This was demonstrated in the statements of support that the SEP received from numerous groups and individuals in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Since 1987, only rarely has the LTTE released political prisoners, and then generally it has insisted that they go into exile and say goodbye to politics. Our release shows the enormous strength of our international party and the struggle of the SEP, and that our struggle is beginning to resonate among broad sections of the masses.

Q: How is that the Tamil parties that have labelled the LTTE as 'fascist' failed to issue even a statement in support of the campaign for your release?

Sambandan: The EPDP [Eelam Peoples Democratic Party], PLOTE and TELO have their own torture camps and armed groups that collaborate with the Sri Lankan military. They have nothing to contribute to the defence of the democratic rights of the Tamil masses in the North and East. There are also some small groups undecided whether to go with PA or the LTTE. How can they come forward to speak for the release of SEP members who are opposing the national-separatist program of the LTTE from the standpoint of proletarian internationalism?

Q: Was your release subject to any conditions? Will you be under a threat from the LTTE if you continue your political work in the Vanni?

Sudharshan: At the time of our release, the LTTE leader Newton stated: 'Work according to your conscience. Support the liberation struggle.' This is what we have always been doing as members of the SEP.

While under detention, we sent two letters, as they asked us to do, to the LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran, along with copies to the leader of their intelligence wing, Pottu Amman. In those letters we did not appeal for any 'conditional release.'

Now on the street, we occasionally meet the persons who arrested us. They apologetically inquire about our well-being.

Q: How has your political work changed since your release? Do people have a different attitude toward the SEP?

Sambandan: Now we don't have to introduce ourselves to the people. They already know who we are and we can speak directly to them about our political program. This is a great advantage for our political work. The racist war, the drastic cuts in subsidies and rations, the lack of any means of living for many people--all of these conditions are drawing people closer to us. The LTTE has no viable solution to any of these problems. The SEP's struggle to release political prisoners in the South also has a big impact.

Extensive reports about our arrest and the campaign for our release were published in the Tamil press. The BBC broadcast interviews with members of the SEP exile organisation in Europe. People have read and heard these things. So interest has grown in reading the *Tholilalar Pathai* and finding out more about the SEP's program and history. We have been able to establish a new party branch.

No solution to the problems of the Tamil masses can be found on a capitalist or separatist basis. The heroism and self-sacrifice of many of the LTTE fighters notwithstanding, the LTTE has led the Tamil masses into a blind alley. Now conditions are maturing for the Tamil struggle against national oppression to come under the leadership of the working class, and thus find its progressive resolution as part of the struggle for international socialism.

See Also:

Victory of international defence campaign strengthens Tamil struggle

The SEP and the fight for the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam

[1 December 1998]

LTTE calls for new talks with Sri Lankan regime

[10 December 1998]



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