Australian aid organisation protests government exclusion of Tamil socialist

16 January 1999

The Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) has added its voice to the mounting protests against the Australian government's denial of a temporary visitor's visa to Tamil socialist, Rajendiram Sutharsan.

Sutharsan is one of four members of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka who were arrested and detained for nearly two months last year by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They were only released after an extensive international campaign mounted by the International Committee of the Fourth International through the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The Australian SEP issued an invitation to Sutharsan to attend its educational seminar in early January, and to address a series of meetings in Melbourne and Sydney about his experiences, as well as the political issues facing the Sri Lankan working class. The meetings would also provide him with the opportunity to thank those in Australia who supported the campaign for his release.

The Australian High Commission in Colombo denied his visa application on the basis that Sutharsan had not proved that his visit was genuine. Concerns were raised that he would seek to remain in Australia. Despite being provided with 25 pages of documentation by the SEP, detailing the global campaign to release Sutharsan, accompanied by a letter guaranteeing his return to Sri Lanka and explaining all the arrangements for the visit, precisely as requested, the High Commission refused to reverse the decision.

In a letter sent to the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, John Ball, from ACFOA's Sri Lanka Peace Project, opposed the barring of Sutharsan from Australia.

"While the SEP is not a member of ACFOA," the letter stated, "ACFOA supports the general principle of freedom of international movement of people to express their political views and share their concerns and experiences. This type of international exchange is important in advancing ACFOA's work and we welcome its availability to other groups.

"I strongly urge you to ask the Australian High Commission to reconsider and reverse the decision so that a visa is provided to Mr Sutharsan to visit Australia."

A civil rights lawyer in Los Angeles wrote to "strenuously protest" the barring of Sutharsan as a "wholesale violation of the political and democratic rights of both Mr Sutharsan and his audience."

"Mr Sutharsan was the subject of an international defense campaign to free him from his lengthy detention by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. His experiences, and the political issues and lessons to be drawn therefrom, are of obvious and widespread interest to those who campaigned for his release.

"The basis for Mr Sutharsan's exclusion, a purported fear that he will not return to Sri Lanka, is paper thin. Mr Sutharsan wishes to come to Australia for principled political reasons, not for reasons of personal gain....His exclusion smacks as well of discrimination on grounds of race and income level."

Letters, faxes and emails have already been sent from Europe, the US and Australia, condemning the Australian authorities' decision. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges labour and human rights organisations, and all groups and individuals concerned with the defence of democratic rights--in Sri Lanka, Australia and internationally--to join in the condemnation of the denial of Sutharsan's visa and to demand that he be allowed to enter Australia.

Letters, faxes and emails should be sent to:

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Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
Suite MF40
Parliament House

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Canberra 2600, Australia
Fax: 61-2-6273-4144

Alexander Downer
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Australian High Commission
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Colombo, Sri Lanka
E-mail: austcom@sri.lanka.net
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Please send copies of all statements of protest to the *World Socialist Web Site* at:
E-mail: editor@wsws.org
Fax: (Australia) 61-2-9790-3501

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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