Tamil socialist barred from visiting Australia

The Editorial Board
6 January 1999

The Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka has rejected the application of Tamil socialist Rajendiram Sutharsan for a temporary visa to attend the summer educational school of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Australia. The decision to bar Sutharsan from entering Australia marks the first time that delegates from Sri Lanka have been prevented from attending educational seminars and conferences organised by the Australian SEP. It has far-reaching implications for the democratic rights of workers and their organisations to engage in political discussion in Australia and internationally.

Sutharsan was one of four members of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka who were arrested and detained for almost two months last year by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The four Tamil socialists were held in the Kilinochichi area in the north of the country.

Throughout the detention, the LTTE leadership, which is notorious for its brutal treatment of political opponents, refused to acknowledge the arrests, or provide information about the whereabouts and health of the SEP members. The LTTE only released them after an extensive international campaign for their freedom waged by the SEP and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The SEP in Australia invited Sutharsan to attend its educational school so he could thank his co-thinkers for their support and speak about his experiences, as well as the more general political issues facing the working class in Sri Lanka. The SEP of Sri Lanka has consistently opposed the government's long-running war against the Tamil people in the North and East of the island. At the same time it has advanced a working class and internationalist perspective for uniting the workers and oppressed masses, Sinhalese and Tamil, in opposition to the LTTE's separatist policies.

On December 30, as Sutharsan was preparing to leave for Australia, the High Commission in Colombo turned down his visa application. A written decision prepared by Jan Cleland, second secretary (immigration), cited as the sole basis for the rejection Sutharsan's alleged failure to prove that the intended visit was genuine.

"As you have provided little information with regard to the purpose of your visit and also shown few commitments to support your return to Sri Lanka, I am not satisfied that you meet this requirement," she wrote.

After a lengthy telephone discussion with SEP Assistant National Secretary Linda Tenenbaum in Sydney, Cleland finally agreed to review her decision. She requested that details be sent concerning Sutharsan's background and association with the party, the SEP's provision of an interpreter during his stay, and evidence of commitments to convince the High Commission that Sutharsan would return to Sri Lanka.

Twenty-five pages of documents were faxed to Colombo detailing his arrest by the LTTE and the broad support won by the international campaign for his release from human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as parliamentarians, trade union officials and numerous individuals in Sri Lanka and around the world.

In an accompanying letter, Tenenbaum outlined the purpose of Sutharsan's attendance at the school, confirmed his long-standing membership in the SEP, and stated that a Tamil interpreter would be flying from Germany to facilitate political discussions at the summer school. In concluding, she explained:

"I would like to point out that for the SEP (Australia) to invite someone for whom there was even the slightest likelihood that they would refuse to return to their own country, would be contrary to our interests. Such a situation would clearly have damaging consequences for any future applications from that country.

"Mr. Sutharsan continues to work as an SEP organiser in the Kilinochichi area and remains fully committed to carrying out his political responsibilities. He also has family commitments, being married, with three children. Because of my knowledge of Mr. Sutharsan's political history and past conduct, I am personally prepared to give my guarantee, on behalf of the SEP, that he will return to Sri Lanka. I believe such a guarantee has also been provided by Mr. Wije Dias, the general secretary of the SEP (Sri Lanka)."

Even though the High Commission now had more than adequate information about the background and purpose of

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the trip, it refused to reverse the decision. In a phone conversation with Tenenbaum on December 31, Cleland dismissed the letter and extensive documentation as having no bearing on the "legal framework" of the case. She reiterated that Sutharsan posed "an unacceptably high risk" to the Australian community in that he might not return to Sri Lanka after his visa expired.

Cleland also attempted to justify her decision by claiming it was "in the interests of consistent decision making," indicating that a substantial number of Tamils from the North and East of Sri Lanka had been refused entry to Australia. When asked to explain what Sutharsan could do to prove he fully intended to return to Sri Lanka, Cleland simply repeated the same pat phrases.

Her polite tone in the conversation with Tenenbaum quickly changed when Wije Dias, general secretary of the SEP in Sri Lanka, subsequently called her and attempted to speak about the case. She refused to discuss the issues and terminated the phone call.

Sutharsan's case has revealed that large numbers of people, especially in Sri Lanka and other parts of Asia, are automatically identified as "having characteristics in common with the applicants at risk of overstaying." The onus is placed on them to prove that they will not remain in Australia. For working class Tamils from the war zones in Sri Lanka, without much money and lacking political connections, it is virtually impossible to meet these criteria.

The notorious White Australia immigration policy was formally abandoned in the mid-1960s, but Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal, have increasingly resorted to making immigrants, particularly from poorer countries in Asia, the scapegoats for the high levels of unemployment and deteriorating living standards that their own policies have created. Thousands of refugees and so-called illegal immigrants have been rounded up and held in detention camps, often for years, before being forcibly deported.

Under the White Australia policy, intending immigrants were compelled to undergo a dictation test in any European language selected by immigration officials. Obscure languages such as Welsh and Lithuanian were often chosen to exclude applicants. The present regulations and "legal framework" are hardly less arbitrary, racist or discriminatory. Visa applicants, who are assessed on the basis of race, ethnicity and income as bearing a "risk factor", have no real possibility of entering Australia as a temporary visitor, let alone as an immigrant.

The barring of Sutharsan was, however, not simply the result of the routine operation of racialist Australian immigration policies. Cleland's refusal to reverse her initial ruling, and her inability to provide any cogent arguments in the face of ample evidence that Sutharsan would not remain in Australia, point to a political motivation for the decision.

To suggest that Sutharsan, who has endured the hardships of jail and interrogation with considerable dignity and courage, would suddenly abandon his deeply felt political convictions and party responsibilities, not to mention his family in Sri Lanka, is absurd. Clearly there are concerns in Australian government circles that a Tamil socialist speaking against Sri Lanka's civil war may disrupt relations with the Sri Lankan government and any moves towards a settlement with the LTTE.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on labour and human rights organisations, and all groups and individuals concerned with the defence of democratic rights--in Australia, Sri Lanka and internationally--to protest in the strongest terms the Australian government's decision to refuse a visa to Sutharsan, and to demand that he be allowed to enter Australia and exercise his political and democratic rights.

Letters, faxes and e-mails should be sent to:

Philip Ruddock
Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
Suite MF40
Parliament House
Canberra 2600, Australia
Fax: 61-2-6273-4144

Alexander Downer
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra 2600, Australia
E-mail: minister.downer@dfat.gov.au
Fax: 61-2-6273-4112

Australian High Commission
PO Box 742
Colombo, Sri Lanka
E-mail: austcom@sri.lanka.net
Fax: 94-1-682-311

Please send copies of all statements of protest to the *World Socialist Web Site* at:

E-mail: editor@wsws.org
Fax: (Australia) 02-9790-3501

See Also:

Record of the campaign for the release of Sri Lankan socialists detained by the LTTE, August 1998

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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