"A politically-biased decision"

Protests continue against Australian government's decision to bar Tamil socialist

Linda Tenenbaum
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Protests are continuing against the Australian government's decision to bar Tamil socialist Rajendiram Sutharsan from entering the country.

Over the past month, politicians in both Australia and Sri Lanka have joined trade unions, civil rights lawyers, academics, students and workers from around the world in condemning the exclusion as racialist, discriminatory and politically motivated.

Sutharsan was invited by the Socialist Equality Party of Australia to attend its summer educational school in January, and to address meetings in Melbourne and Sydney on his 50-day detention last year by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Along with three other members of the Sri Lankan SEP, Sutharsan was only released after an extensive international campaign by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), waged through the World Socialist Web Site.

The Australian High Commission in Colombo rejected Sutharsan's application for a temporary visa, on the grounds that he had not proven that he would return to Sri Lanka.

Rajendram Ramamoorthy, a Member of Parliament for the Jaffna District, the Tamil area in the north of Sri Lanka, sent a letter to the Australian High Commission in Colombo strongly condemning its position.

"Sutharsan is one of the four members of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka arrested and detained by the LTTE last year. The international campaign waged by this party, to which many Australian labour organisations and concerned individuals rallied, was able to release those four detained members. Therefore, any right thinking person could understand that Sutharsan would have utilised the opportunity to visit Australia to thank all those who worked to get them released.

"I am well aware that the Sri Lankan SEP is a responsible organisation and that it works to unify the workers internationally under the banner of the Fourth International. On that principle it opposes the war against the Tamils. Therefore, Sutharsan's visit also would have provided an opportunity to explain the conditions faced by Tamils under war conditions.

"....I earnestly request that you reverse this decision."

A Sri Lankan artist and art critic, Darshana Medis, wrote: "It is a well known fact that Sutharsan was in the custody of the LTTE in the recent past, and that he did not seek their sympathy to get himself released. On the contrary, the LTTE was compelled to release him for his unbending and firm ideological stance against them, as well as the pressure created by the SEP internationally.

"My inference is that a person of his calibre will not stoop down to seek political asylum in another country. On the other hand, I presume that both the SEP (Sri Lanka) and the SEP (Australia) are responsible parties, and their assurance is more than enough to dissolve any doubts regarding his return."

In a letter to the Minister for Immigration and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, on behalf of the central NSW branch of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), Deputy Branch Secretary Jim Donovan wrote:

"Whilst we can appreciate your concern about the possibility of the applicant refusing to return to his own country, we believe this a trivial excuse for refusing him a visa.

"The tragic events in Sri Lanka, the chaos, the destruction and the appalling loss of life, saddens all the friends of that war torn country.

"Surely all governments and people of concern and good will desire to see a just and democratic solution to this war and an immediate stop to the blood letting.

"We feel sure all decent people in this country would welcome Mr Sutharsan's visit to Australia and accept with profound interest his comments and views in relation to events in his country."

The letter continued: "We feel strongly the undemocratic and needless aspect of the denial of this visa, which if it

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continues, can only hold this country of ours up to ridicule throughout the democratic world."

Anthony Albanese, the federal Labor MP for Grayndler, in Sydney's south-western suburbs, sent a letter expressing his concern at the refusal by the Australian authorities to grant the visa.

"Mr Rajendiram was applying for this visa in order to attend an annual educational conference in Sydney and to partake in discussions on the political situation in Sri Lanka.

"I call on the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to intervene and grant Mr Rajendiram a visitor's visa to enter Australia in order to attend this conference."

In an interview on the weekly Sinhala program on radio 3CR, a community station based in Melbourne, a member of the Sri Lankan SEP, Rajitha Pereira, explained that the decision was "part of a general policy to refuse visas to people from poor countries".

"We have found that there exists a gazetted notification listing some 40 countries as risk areas. People within certain specific age groups are simply not allowed into Australia. Because of this law, applicants are blacklisted even before they apply for a visa.

"In this specific case," he said, "the decision is an attack on the democratic rights not only of Sutharsan, but the workers and youth of this country who supported the campaign of the ICFI to free our members from the LTTE's custody. It is a politically biased decision."

Asked by the interviewer to explain the political reasons behind it, Pereira answered: "The Australian and Sri Lankan governments have a very close relationship, which plays a crucial role for both countries. Australia is the second largest investor in Sri Lanka. At the same time, the LTTE has a strong presence in Australia, at least financially.

"The war has become a burden to both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Both sides have financial difficulties, as well as problems in recruiting forces. And it has become clear that the war plays a negative role when it comes to attracting investment to Sri Lanka. Most of the transnational corporations have made it clear that the war is affecting their profit-making capabilities. Questions are being asked from all quarters about whether it is worthwhile sustaining it.

"Last October, business leaders in the south called for a round table conference of the major parties to solve what they call the 'ethnic question'. They insisted that all the major parties should get together on a devolution proposal. At the same time, the LTTE is demonstrating its willingness to participate in discussions involving a 'third party'. In the past, secondary LTTE leaders have advanced this proposal, but this is the first time that the LTTE leader, Prabhakaran himself, has openly called for it.

"When you take all this together, it is clear that Australia has a vested interest in the situation. Australia understands that its position would be much stronger vis-Ã -vis the other major capitalist countries if it could play the role of third party. After the signing of the SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area) agreement, Sri Lanka will become a gateway to India as well. And this has been mentioned in several newspaper articles in Australia, especially in the Financial Review.

"So we can ask the question: Is the Australian government fearful that a visit by a member of the SEP--whose socialist positions are totally opposed to the positions of both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE--might disrupt this vital relationship?"

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges all organisations and individuals concerned with the defence of democratic rights-in Australia, Sri Lanka and internationally-to send letters of protest, demanding that the Australian authorities reverse their decision and allow Sutharsan to visit Australia.

Letters, faxes and emails 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
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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) 61-2-9790-3501

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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