

Australian authorities yet to respond

More protests against exclusion of Tamil socialist

Linda Tenenbaum
20 March 1999

More than two months after the first complaints were formally lodged, the Australian government has yet to respond to demands from both within the country and abroad that it reverse its decision to exclude Tamil socialist, Rajendiram Sutharsan, from visiting Australia.

Sutharsan was one of four members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka arrested last year by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for conducting political work in the Kilinochchi area in the north of the island. The four men were only released, after nearly two months in detention, through the pressure brought to bear on the LTTE by an extensive international campaign waged through the World Socialist Web Site.

Sutharsan was invited by the SEP in Australia to attend an educational school in January, and to subsequently address meetings in Melbourne and Sydney about his experiences, and about the political situation facing workers in Sri Lanka.

The Australian High Commission in Colombo rejected his application for a visitor's visa, on the grounds that he may attempt to remain in the country. Despite receiving official guarantees that he would return, as well as a 25- page submission documenting the campaign for his release and his political and personal commitments in Sri Lanka, the High Commission refused to change its position.

A continuing stream of protests has been made to the Australian High Commission in Colombo, and to the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in Canberra from individuals and organisations concerned with democratic and civil rights from around the world. These include trade unions, civil rights lawyers, aid organisations, students, academics, artists, workers and young people from Europe, Asia, North America, New Zealand and Australia.

Tony Woolgar, the National Secretary of the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia, an organisation representing 27,000 workers, wrote to Philip Ruddock, the Minister for Immigration, at the end of February to express his "strongest objections to this decision and urge you to reverse it immediately."

"As you know", the letter continued "the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia can speak with some authority about the undemocratic and discriminatory actions of your department.

"Last January, Australian immigration officials refused to provide a temporary entry visa to Farida Zaheer, Chairwoman of Pakistan's National Textile Union, who was to attend an international conference hosted by our union in Sydney.

"Ms Zaheer provided immigration department officials in Islamabad with a return air ticket, documentation of her union position and

written evidence that she would be returning to Pakistan after the conference. Despite this, you refused to issue her with a visa.

"It was only after strenuous objections from the TCFUA and publicity in the news media, that your department finally decided to provide Ms Zaheer with a visa.

"The TUCFA regarded this incident with the utmost seriousness and has warned other members of the union movement about it.

"We consider your refusal to grant Mr Sutharsan a temporary visa an attack on his political and democratic rights, as well as the rights of those in Australia who wish to meet him and hear what he has to say.

"I urge you to reverse your decision and immediately provide Mr Sutharsan with a temporary visa. You can rest assured that our organisation, and its 27,000 members, will be informed if you fail to do so."

From Sri Lanka, the secretary of the Elastomeric United Action Committee, representing workers at the Elastomeric factory in Bokundara, Piliyandala, wrote: "The workers of the Elastomeric factory express their indignation over this gross violation of democratic rights."

The letter described as "hostile", the attitude of the Australian government towards Asian workers who apply to visit the country, adding: "We have come to know that your government now arrests immigrants from poor countries and detains them until they are deported.

"We are also aware that if the Australian government admits a few such workers at all, it is solely because... it wants to use these workers to lower the wages of Australian workers. It is also well known that the Australian government carries out racist discrimination against Aboriginal workers in the country."

The National Secretary of Samasewaya, a Sri Lankan peace organisation affiliated to UNESCO and the Central Council of Social Services, confirmed, in his letter to the Australian High Commission, that Sutharsan had been released "as a result of the demands made by international organisations as well as by the international working class". He called on the High Commission to "reevaluate" its decision and provide Sutharsan with the opportunity "to express his gratitude" to those who helped free him from detention.

Also from Sri Lanka, the General Secretary of the United Federation of Labour, Saranapala Silva, sent a formal request to the Australian High Commissioner that he "intervene and revive this matter, and make every possible endeavour to instruct your visa officer to issue a temporary visa to Mr Sutharsan..."

Mahinda Devage, Organising Secretary of the United Socialist

Party, wrote "Even after tendering ample evidence that his intended visit was genuine and he would return to Sri Lanka after his commitments there you have not allowed him to visit Australia.

"This is a flagrant violation of international human rights and your obligations under international human rights law. We vehemently protest your decision and call upon you to rescind that decision and allow Mr Sutharsan to visit Australia.

D.N. Devasiri, on behalf of Group X, wrote: ' We think this is an utterly discriminatory act against Mr Sutharsan. There is no justification whatsoever, within a democratic setup, to bar an individual who fulfills basic preconditions, from entering a country freely. Therefore, we urge the Australian High Commission to issue a visa to Mr Sutharsan..."

Many workers and young people in Australia have added their voices to the campaign. KM from Melbourne, wrote in letters to several government departments: "Whatever the reasons for the rejection of the visa application, they represent an affront to the right of Rajendiram Sutharsan to speak in this country of his experiences and philosophies, and an affront to the collective right of those in this country who want to hear him."

DC, also from Melbourne wrote to the Department of Immigration: "I was looking forward to attending public meetings in Melbourne that he would be appearing at, and I'm disappointed that the opportunity to hear his story will be missed due to your decision."

SM, a Sydney hospital worker, attacked the government's decision, writing: "Regardless of a person's race, religion, skin colour or political following no-one should be denied a visa entry into a country. Whatever happened to a person's democratic rights?"

She concluded: "This campaign will continue until the decision is reversed. I ask that you please look into this matter urgently and allow a fellow human being to exercise his political and democratic rights."

A Sydney student, MS wrote: "... denying Mr Rajendiram Sutharsan a temporary visa to enter Australia merely deprives the Australian youth and working people of their democratic right to hear a fellow worker speak his mind.

"Assuming that Mr Sutharsan may not return to his homeland is a lame excuse for rejecting his visa, considering Mr Sutharsan's dedication and commitment to his SEP work in Sri Lanka.

"I wholly support the SEP and International Committee of the Fourth International's efforts to reverse such a thoughtless decision by the Australian government."

JC, from Dandenong in Victoria read about the case on the WSWs: "I have seen from the internet the Australian High Commission's decision not to grant a temporary visa for Rajendiram Sutharsan to visit Australia.

"Such a decision appears to go against Australia's non-discriminatory immigration policy. For the High Commission's decision gives the impression that no matter how much documentation is given to the contrary, the Australian authorities believe--or at the very least suspect-- that everyone coming from an economically depressed part of the world, on a temporary visa, will have hidden intentions of staying permanently in Australia. Considering Rajendiram's background--which I believe you are fully aware of--I believe such a notion is incorrect.

"In fact I believe that all immigrants--who form a substantial part of the Australian population and have helped to build Australia into the nation it is today--should be concerned by this decision. For if the relatives of anyone of Australia's millions of immigrants would like to come to Australia for a temporary stay, then they may be refused a

temporary visa simply because they come from an "economically depressed part of the world".

I thought the law included the much loved notion: "everyone is assumed innocent until proven guilty". Here I get the impression the law is shifting towards the opposite stance, i.e. "everyone is assumed guilty until proven innocent". If this is the case, it is a very high hurdle for anyone to jump over. For no matter how much documentation the applicant provides, if the immigration authorities have got the slightest doubt about the genuineness of the application, then these immigration authorities would declare a "guilty verdict" on the applicant.

"I believe the Australian High Commission should grant a temporary visa for Rajendiram Sutharsan to visit Australia."

The WSWs urges all 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:

Philip Ruddock

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Alexander Downer

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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:

wsws.org/contact