

Two Tamil political prisoners killed as Sri Lankan prison guards crush protests

K. Ratnayake
12 January 2000

Prison guards at Kalutara prison in Sri Lanka last week killed two Tamil political prisoners in clashes aimed at suppressing protests over jail conditions and the recent assassination of Tamil politician, Kumar Ponnambalam. More than one hundred prisoners were injured, some of them critically.

During the first clash provoked by prison guards on January 6, about 85 detainees were injured. Fifty of them were admitted to the prison hospital and 35 were sent to the Kalutara area hospital. Five critically injured detainees were admitted to the Colombo national hospital.

Anthonipillai Jesudasan, a young Tamil from Vavuniya, died of his injuries. According to a hospital source, his head had been crushed. A Judicial Medical Officer (JMO) has now confirmed that the death occurred due to injuries to the head and a brain hemorrhage.

The following day another 24 injured detainees were admitted to the area hospital after further clashes. Hospital officials stated after a postmortem on Sunday that another Tamil detainee Srikumar had died after receiving 10 gunshot wounds to the chest and face. About 12 guards sustained mainly minor injuries.

Kalutara prison, situated 40 kilometres south of the capital Colombo, is a special jail holding nearly 800 Tamils, many of whom have been arrested under the country's harsh security legislation for allegedly being associated with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Sri Lankan army has engaged in a 17-year war to suppress the LTTE, which is fighting for a separate state in the northern and eastern provinces.

Most of the detainees are from the north and east of the country—about 40 are from the hill country tea plantation area where there is a largely Tamil-speaking workforce. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka has been campaigning for the release of six young Tamil detainees from the plantation area who have been held for over a year and a half without trial on concocted charges.

The SEP demanded permission from the Commissioner of Prisons to visit the jail on Saturday but were denied access on the ground that it was a holiday. A lawyer and a journalist from the SEP went to the Kalutara area hospital to interview injured detainees. About 15 armed jail guards and police had been deployed in the hospital wards where detainees were being treated. In each bed there were two of the prisoners handcuffed to each other. The jailers prevented the SEP representatives from speaking to the injured.

Parliamentarians from the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) were only allowed to speak to the injured after they contacted the acting Minister of Justice. One of the TULF MPs, Ponnambalam Selvarajah, reported that no treatment had been provided to some of the injured, including Sivanathan Kishore, the former Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRC) coordinator for Vavuniya. "He has crying in pain with a broken limb but not a soul had attended to him," Selvarajah said.

A picture is beginning to emerge of what led to the clashes. For the past two months, detainees have been engaged in continuous campaigns to demand better conditions and their release. On January 5, inmates started a fast and some climbed onto the roof in protest over two specific demands. Firstly, they called for a gate to be built in a recently erected wall separating two prison wards. The wall prevents detainees from meeting each other and is a barrier to easy access to the library. A second demand was for an end to the recently introduced measure whereby prisoners are handcuffed when taken to meet visiting relatives.

On January 6, 10 prison officials headed by the Commissioner of Prisons visited the jail to discuss the detainees' demands. Inmates had hoisted black flags to protest the assassination on the previous day of Tamil politician and lawyer, Kumar Ponnambalam, who had appeared in courts on their behalf and presented their

grievances to authorities. The commissioner rejected the prisoners' demands outright.

Following the failure of the talks, jailers instigated a provocative search of Wardroom F, where prison officials alleged weapons had been hidden. The guards began to assault prisoners setting off a clash that continued for nearly three hours. The prison commissioner was still at the jail during the attack. On the following day, the guards armed with semi-automatic weapons finally crushed the protests.

The acting Justice Minister and prison authorities tried to justify the actions of the guards by claiming that the detainees had begun a pre-planned attack. As “proof” they exhibited a few pieces of firewood, some small iron rods and a few blunt knives. These were the arms allegedly used by detainees to mount an attack on guards armed with semi-automatic weapons and backed by armed police and army sentries in and around the detention camp. Facing mounting criticism, the People's Alliance government has had to transfer the prison commissioner.

All of the Tamil detainees are being held under the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act, under which the Defence Secretary can issue orders to detain a person and extract a “confession” that can then be used in evidence against the detained. Many of have been held for lengthy periods, some for nearly three years. One of the longstanding demands of the detainees has been for authorities to file charges against them or release them immediately.

In July 1983, during the United National Party (UNP) government-sponsored pogroms against Tamils in the south of Sri Lanka, 53 Tamil political prisoners were killed in cold blood in Weilikade prison in Colombo. In November 1997, two Tamil prisoners were killed and many injured in Kalutara prison when prison guards provoked the handful of Sinhala prisoners to attack Tamil detainees.



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