

Arbitrary detention of schoolchildren provokes a student boycott throughout northern Sri Lanka

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Faced with a spreading student strike on the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka, the government and the police have been compelled to release two school students and their mother who were picked up by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on January 25, taken to Colombo and detained without charge for eight days.

Vinoth Sriskandarajah, 12, Priya Sriskandarajah, 16, a student at the Vasavilan Central College, and their mother Valarmathy Sriskandarajah, 42, were interrogated in Jaffna and Colombo over a suicide bomb attack last December 18 at the election rally of the opposition United National Party (UNP) at Ja-ela. Eight people were killed and more than 55 injured. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has waged a protracted war for a separate Tamil state, is widely believed to have carried out the bombing.

Neither Valarmathy Sriskandarajah nor the two children were accused of any involvement in the attack. Her only "crime" was she was thought to have been the mother of the suicide bomber. Vinoth Sriskandarajah, a Year 8 student, was suddenly seized by police in his school classroom and taken away without informing the school principal. His sister, Priya, was arrested at home on the same day.

In response to inquiries about whereabouts of the three, the military and police chiefs on the Jaffna peninsula denied that they were under arrest and refused to divulge any information about their whereabouts. Authorities also flouted official procedures by ignoring a requirement in such cases to inform the state-controlled Human Rights Commission in Jaffna.

After their release, Valarmathy Sriskandarajah told

the press in Jaffna: "... I was taken by the CID to the Kankesanthurai (KKS) military detention camp for questioning on January 25. Next day I was taken to Colombo and asked to stay at a house. The following day they showed me the head of my son and his photo. I accepted that it was my son. The 'blood test' also confirmed that it was my son".

News of the detentions provoked outrage among school students, teachers and school administrators.

On January 31, the Jaffna District Schools Student Union organised a student boycott at schools in the Jaffna town including Jaffna Kanagaratnam Madya Mahavidyalayam, Jaffna Central College, Vaitheeswara Vidyalayam, Vembadi Ladies College and Jaffna Hindu College. In the Vadamarachchi area, leading schools like Heartly College, Nellyyady Mahavidyalayam, Vada Hindu Ladies College and Udupiddy Mission Ladies College were almost deserted. In the areas outside Jaffna town, the students at Manipay Hindu College, Urumpirai Hindu College, Tellipalai Union College and other schools supported the campaign.

Despite tight military restrictions on movement and political activity, teams of students visited other schools to urge them to join the boycott. Army personnel detained one team after speaking to students at the Kopay Christian College. In the Uduvil electorate, student teams reportedly argued the case with school principals who urged students not to join the campaign because "there is a civil administration here now". In same area, 11 students were detained by the military for pasting up posters in support of the boycott and later released.

On February 1, schools throughout the entire Jaffna

peninsula, including Kayts, came to a standstill. A student committee of 20 representatives from leading schools of Jaffna district met and decided to stage a street demonstration to hand over a memorandum to government authorities demanding the immediate release of Vinoth and Priya.

The campaign also began to draw in support from others. Students of Jaffna University expressed their support and decided to join the boycott on February 2.

The executive of the Association of Northern Province Principals sent a memorandum to the President Chandrika Kumaratunga stating: "There is a feeling of fear among the students and parents, after the arrest of S. Vinoth and his sister Priya. Vinoth was arrested from the school without proper notice to the principal. On the same day, his sister Priya was arrested at her home. No official notice was issued about these arrests. It is a matter for condemnation."

The association also insisted: "Students should not be subjected to military and police interrogation causing psychological effects. They should be brought forward immediately before the law and granted justice without delay."

The Tamil Teachers Union, representing the Tamil-speaking teachers throughout the island, expressed its readiness to join the student campaign. "Unless they (the two school children) are released, a condition will be created under which, teachers and students will join the school boycott campaign. Not only that, this school boycott campaign will be extended to districts other than Jaffna district also."

In the midst of this crisis, Jaffna Peninsula army commander Brigadier Gamini Jayasinghe hurriedly held a discussion with the school principals on February 1, at the headquarters of the 52nd army division. The Brigadier tried to reassure those present by saying that no student arrests would take place in the future without informing school principals. He also claimed that the arrests had taken place without the knowledge of the military in the Northern Province.

On February 2, as the school boycott entered its third day, a special plane carrying Vinoth, Priya and their mother landed at Palaly Airport at 1.30 pm and the three were released at Jaffna town. Both students, however, were ordered to report to the nearest police station every two weeks and to prove their "good behavior".

The extent and rapidity of the campaign indicates the depth of hostility to the repressive police and military apparatus established by the Kumaratunga government to prosecute the war against the LTTE. The treatment of Valarmathy Sriskandarajah and her children is one graphic example of the monitoring, harassment, arbitrary detention, interrogation and in some cases murder of the members of the Tamil minority throughout the country. The racist character of war is revealed by the underlying assumption of the security forces that every Tamil person, including schoolchildren, is a potential LTTE supporter.



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