

Report from a Sri Lankan fishing village—Part Three

A long history of state intimidation and repression

R. M. Dayaratna
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Following the death of a Tamil fisherman in a collision with a naval vessel on January 24, World Socialist Web Site reporters went to the fisherman's village of Udappuva and spoke to villagers about the circumstances of the incident, the living conditions they face and the history of repression in the area by the police and military. In the final part of the report, they detail the lengthy history of harassment, intimidation and repression that Tamils in particular are subject to at the hands of the police and military.

Because Udappuva is relatively remote and surrounded by the sea on three sides, the village has been repeatedly accused of being a transit point for LTTE arms and fighters to the south. Again and again the villagers have borne the brunt of severe repression during sweeps by security forces for weapons and LTTE members. In most cases the police have found no weapons and those arrested have been found innocent.

The Udappuva villagers have close connections through their livelihood to Tamils throughout the north and east of the country. Refugees seeking to escape the war sometimes come to the village to ask for help from their relatives. The appearance of these refugees has often been used by the Sri Lankan security forces as a pretext for a sweep through the village. During the past few years, a number of fishermen, youth and women have been detained. Some have been severely tortured and imprisoned without trial as LTTE suspects.

In July 1996, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, Sellaiah Rajkumar, was detained by police on allegations of being a suspected LTTE member. He was tortured and held in detention camp without trial for more than a year even though as a member of the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, he opposed not only the Sri Lankan government's war but also the separatist program of the LTTE. He was finally released after an international campaign conducted by the sections of the ICFI to challenge his continued imprisonment.

The detention of Sellaiah Rajkumar like those of other villagers in Udappuva is part of a wider pattern of repression against Tamils throughout the island which points to the racist character of the war being waged by the Sri Lankan government. To be a Tamil in Sri Lanka is to be automatically suspected of being an LTTE member and subject to arbitrary arrest, torture and lengthy detention without trial. WSWS reporters spoke to a number of villagers who had suffered the same fate as Rajkumar.

R. Santhivel is a recent victim of state repression. He was arrested by the Nuwara Eliya police on September 13 while he was at home in Udappuva. His younger brother Mailvaganam had been arrested earlier as an LTTE suspect when he has gone to Nuwara Eliya—a town in the tea plantations in central hill areas. Under police torture he revealed he had a brother at Udappuva and that was the sole reason for Santhivel's arrest. Santhivel said that he was subjected to severe torture for 21 days and then produced before a court as an LTTE suspect. He was later discharged as the police had no evidence for the charge.

“Police tortured me brutally for eight days and questioned whether I had contacts with the LTTE. I said I hadn't. Then they handcuffed me and beat my feet. They brought my brother before me and questioned me again. That day a constable told me to slap my brother. I touched the constable's feet and said I couldn't. He kicked me then. My head was hit against an iron cupboard and started bleeding from nose and mouth. Thereafter they dragged me away and poured cold water on my head,” Santhivel said.

When taking him to court, the police had warned Santhivel to say nothing about the torture. “They asked me not to tell the courts that I had been assaulted. The police told me I would not be sent home if I revealed the truth. What an injustice to arrest me and torture me for an offence the police thought my brother had done,” he said.

Though he was discharged, Santhivel had to undergo medical treatments for weeks. His brother was subjected to the same brutal torture and is still in detention in a police cell. Santhivel said that he did not believe his brother had committed any offence.

In October 1998, Manoranjani, a mother of three children, and two young men, Udayanathan and K. Kanakalingam, were arrested by police at Peliyagoda near Colombo. Kanakalingam was released after a month but Udayanathan is still in prison as an “LTTE suspect.” Manoranjani was released after languishing in

jail for more than a year. Police severely tortured her to extract an admission that she was connected to the LTTE.

Manoranjani's "crime" was that she had visited Mulaithivu—an LTTE base—for fishing about seven years before. She told WSWs reporters: "Police assaulted me to get a statement stating that I had connections with the LTTE. Without any connection how can I give a statement? They continuously asked me why I had travelled to Mulaithivu. The police detained me without charge in the Peliyagoda police cells for six months. What right do they have to arrest me just for going to Mulaithivu."

Manoranjani was produced before a court after being kept for six months in police detention, but the magistrate postponed her case citing the non-availability of dates for the trial. She was transferred to Welikada prison—one of the country's main prisons situated in Colombo. She was left to rot in prison for more than a year while the magistrate could find no free date for her trial. Finally, after this lengthy period in detention, the magistrate had to discharge her without charge.

According to Manoranjani, there were 1,500 detainees in the prison. A considerable number were Tamil women who had fled from the war in the north and east to Colombo. Among them were young women aged 20-25 who had been held for seven or eight years without charge after being taken into police custody.

In January 1997, the police arrested five fishermen in Udappuva—Perumal Rajah, Mutthuramu Vairavamurthi, Selvanayagam, Muththuvairan and Iyngre Kumar.

Mutthuramu Vairavamurthi, a father of two children, was detained on January 10. The immediate reasons for his arrest was that a friend of his who had been taken into custody in Vavunia in the government-controlled Northern Province had said under interrogation that he was going to meet Vairavamurthi. They had fished together three years before. On that basis Vairavamurthi was held for more than one year in the Magazine prison in Colombo and was only released after legal action by his relatives.

Selvanayagam, a father of two children, was arrested on January 31. His offence was sending his sister's children, who were refugees, back to Mulaithivu. He was subjected to severe torture and had been kept in the Magazine prison. He was later released without charge after a legal action.

Perumal Rajah, who was arrested on January 27, was tortured and forced to sign a statement in Sinhalese, a language he does not understand, admitting he was a LTTE member. He was detained in the Magazine and Kalutara prisons for more than a year and later released with a suspended jail term of seven years after obtaining a ruling that the guilty plea was made under duress. According to Sri Lankan law, a suspended sentence can be activated if the convicted person commits another offence.

Perumal explained the cruelties of prison life. "The jail where we were detained was not suitable to keep even animals. We were given rice and boiled meat as food. Bread brought for breakfast was kept in the place where the dogs slept. On November 28, 1997, all the prisoners went on a hunger-strike demanding cleaner meals," he said.

After six days the jailers took away the fasting prisoners on the pretext of negotiations with the Commissioner of Prisons to solve the problem. They were handcuffed, beaten with truncheons and later transferred to Kalutara prison about 40 kilometres from Colombo. He said his experiences in the Kalutara prison were more desolate and cruel. More than 600 Tamil detainees started a fast demanding their release. The jailers provoked Sinhala prisoners to attack the fasting Tamil prisoners resulting in several deaths.

Iyngre Kumar, the fifth detainee, languished in the prison for more than a year. He was arrested while drawing fishing nets at Udappuva beach. He was also put through all the brutalities experienced by other young Tamil detainees. After the torture, the police tried to use him as a finger man. They covered the upper part of his body with a gunny bag (a sack made out of jute fibre) and asked him to point out LTTE members.

"I had no knowledge about LTTE cadres, so how could I identify village youth as LTTEers?" he said. Unable to convert him into a spy, police tortured him to obtain a confession that he was a LTTE member. He was forced to sign a statement written in Sinhalese which they claimed was his release form. At his trial on August 31, 1998, the defence lawyer advised him to plead guilty, saying that he would be discharged. Under legal advice he had reluctantly pleaded guilty to being an LTTE sympathiser. Due to be released on December 16, 1998, he was finally let out on January 17, 1999.

On January 6, 1996, arms and explosives were found buried under the Andimuni coast of Udappuva. Police arrested 11 fishermen and a woman as suspects, tortured them and detained them in the Magazine prison for nearly two years. They were released under suspended prison terms of 5 years, after pleading guilty to "not disclosing information" about the buried weapons to the police. They pleaded guilty not because they committed any offence but again on the advice of their defence lawyers.

The systematic character of the state repression against Tamils lends weight to the suspicions of villagers that the death of the fisherman, Kandiah Sivakumar, on January 24 was not an accident but that his boat was deliberately rammed by the Sri Lankan navy to intimidate other local fishermen. The failure of the navy craft to rescue the two fisherman and the lack of any official police search certainly underlines the callous indifference of the Sri Lankan government and the state apparatus to the lives of the poor, particularly if they are Tamils.



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