

Sri Lankan prisoners of war undertake hunger strike for release

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A hunger strike in February by a group of soldiers and sailors has drawn attention to the plight of hundreds of Sri Lankan soldiers and naval personnel who have been taken prisoner during Sri Lanka's bitter 17-year war between the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

As many as 1,400 men are detained in prisoner of war (POW) camps in the LTTE-controlled Vanni area of northern Sri Lanka. Among them are soldiers from the Ponneryn army camp, a major government military base situated near the Jaffna lagoon in the North and captured by the LTTE in 1993. There are also sailors from the ship *Sagarwardhana* captured by the LTTE in 1994.

On February 10, after seven years in custody, 15 of the soldiers and sailors launched the hunger strike to demand that the government enter into negotiations with the LTTE to secure their release. The LTTE indicated that it was ready to hand over the men to a "responsible government official", allowed access to the men by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and granted permission for their families to travel through LTTE-controlled territory to the prison camp.

The Sri Lankan government was embarrassed by the hunger strike, as it feared publicity about the fate of prisoners of war would undermine the campaign launched on February 1 to attract 15,000 new recruits into the army. Much of the Sri Lankan military is recruited from rural areas where joining the armed forces is one of the few avenues for paid employment.

The government reluctantly granted permission for 25 relatives of the sailors to go to Puthukudiuruppu, near Mulaithivu in the Vanni, where they are being held, only after several requests were made by the Association Comprising Relatives of Missing

Servicemen (ACRMS), an organisation representing the families of POW's. However it refused to meet the LTTE's terms that a government official be sent and sought to prevent any media coverage of the visit.

E.P. Nanayakkara, the president of ACRMS, told the WSWS: "We suggested that media personnel, a responsible government representative and a representative of our organisation must join the tour. But a spokesman for the Red Cross stated that only relatives would be allowed, under a government directive."

Relatives charge that the Sri Lankan government did not provide them any assistance to undertake the visit to the North. All the facilities, including boarding, lodging and food, were provided by the Red Cross.

WSWS reporters were able to meet some of the families who travelled to Puthukudiuruppu on February 22. The relatives were able to spend several days with the prisoners, many of whom were already in a serious medical condition after 12 days without food. According to one of the men's mothers, some of them did not recognise their family members.

After appeals by their families, the men resumed eating on February 25. However they told their relatives that they were exhausted and unless the government made arrangements for their release they had no other option but to resume the hunger strike until death.

Chandani Boyagoda, the wife of one of the prisoners, Captain Ajith Kumara Boyagoda, tearfully said: "My husband told me, 'don't worry. Either I'll be released or my corpse will reach home.'" The couple have two children.

Venuhamy, from a remote peasant colony in the Anuradhapura district in the north-central province and the mother of detainee Upali Somarathne, said: "The

government doesn't care. If somebody representing the government had accompanied us, we would have returned with all our children.” She added: “They were so weak. All the children are suffering. Tamil children are suffering too. This war must be stopped.”

B.A. Wimalawathie, the mother of POW Priyantha Ananda and also from a village in the Anuradhapura district, explained: “We saw the sufferings of people living there. They came to us and talked. They told us to request the president put an end to this war. There was not any racial prejudices among them towards us.”

I.D. Wilson, the father of POW Nimal Nishantha, detailed the government's callous attitude towards prisoners and their families. For seven years he has sent appeals requesting the help of the president and prime minister but has not even received an acknowledgement.

Nimal's mother, Nimalawathie Hewage, and his brother, Kamal Nishantha, who live in the remote village of Kahaduwa in southern Sri Lanka, had also travelled to Puthukudiruppu.

Kamal explained that his mother had collapsed at seeing the state of her son. Although she recovered, she cannot remember anything that happened during the tour.

“We didn't see people on our journey for a long distance. There were ruined bunkers and camps along the road. When we reached Puthukudiruppu about 2,000 men and women had gathered to greet us. When we saw that they were happy to see us, our fears vanished,” Kamal Nishantha said.

He said that they were shown the former Mulaitivu army camp, which was captured by the LTTE, and a cemetery where 3,500 Tamil war victims are buried. Groups of fishermen from the area had appealed to them to demand the government halt the war. The property and homes of these fishermen had been destroyed during the fighting and they were now living in temporary huts.

S.H. Gunadasa, the father of another POW, Nilantha Gunawardena, explained how poverty had forced his son to join the army: “He couldn't continue his study. He was unable to find a job. The only job available was joining the army.” Nilantha's three brothers are informal manual labourers, earning about 150 rupees (US\$2) per day when they are able to get work. The only additional income for the family is around 7,000

rupees (US\$95) every six months—equal to the monthly salary of a lower rank soldier—earned from the cultivation of cinnamon on a small plot of land.

After the relatives' visit, four of the prisoners were released by the LTTE as a gesture. One was in a critical condition due to the hunger strike. The relatives said one man had been released because of a letter written by his seven-year-old daughter to the LTTE leadership.

The imprisoned soldiers and sailors have addressed a letter to Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga stating that they will recommence their hunger strike if no action has been taken by April 13. ACRMS met on April 2 and decided to launch a protest campaign from that date, including rallies in the capital Colombo.

The government, however, has still not sent a definite reply to the request by the ACRMS that it agree to the LTTE's terms and send an official to the Vanni. Four parliamentarians have declared their willingness to go north and secure the release of the other sailors. But their fate has become embroiled in the manoeuvring between the government and the LTTE. As far as both sides are concerned, the prisoners are simply propaganda pawns in the ongoing conflict.



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