Protest in eastern Sri Lanka to mark the "disappearance" of army detainees

S. Rajendran
2 October 2000

A hartal—a full-day strike coupled with the closure of shops—took place on September 5 in the Batticaloa district in the east of Sri Lanka to mark the anniversary of the “disappearance” of 174 people seized by armed forces at the Eastern University refugee camp in 1990.

The refugees are just some of the more than 60,000 victims of the brutal 17-year-long war waged by successive Sri Lankan governments to suppress the democratic rights of the country's Tamil minority.

The agitation was organised by the Peoples Vigilant Committee of Batticaloa—a local organisation—and was supported by Tamils and Muslims. Shops in the district's main towns—Chenkalady, Eravur, Vantharumoolai, Valaichenai and Batticaloa—closed for the day and transport services did not operate.

Many of the schools did not function and lectures at the Eastern University were cancelled. To register their protest, students hoisted black flags in the University premises. Government offices were also deserted.

Security forces attempted to intimidate those involved in the hartal. Police and soldiers smashed the doors of shops with a crowbar and were able to force some traders to open. As a threat, police officers noted the details of shops that were shut. But the streets were completely deserted. A few buses operating from Batticaloa town were stopped at Vantharumoolai and turned away by protesting youth.

The “disappearances” occurred at the height of military operations in the Batticaloa district under the United National Party (UNP) government. About 40,000 people from the area sought refuge on the university grounds not only from the security forces but also from the Home Guards (a supplementary force to the police) and armed Tamil groups such as the Mohan Group from People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), which operated with the military.

The security forces surrounded the university refugee camp on September 5, 1990, ordered people to form queues and then paraded them before masked informers, who picked out alleged LTTE members. Some 158 people were detained, packed onto state transport buses, driven towards Valaichenai and never seen again.

Following protests against the disappearances by the human rights groups and some trade unions in the North and East, and in Colombo, the government was forced to appoint a presidential commission of inquiry under the chairmanship of a retired Appeal Courts Judge K. Balakidner.

The inquiry report confirmed that 158 refugees were arrested and taken away by soldiers under Captains Palitha, Gunaratna and Munas and Major Maseed. The commission recommended these military officers, who were also responsible for another 16 disappearance on September 23, 1990, should be charged but no legal action has been taken.

Under growing pressure in Sri Lanka and internationally, the Defence Ministry issued a statement claiming: “We arrested only 32 persons and they were released within 24 hours, following an inquiry.” None of the detainees ever returned home however. Local people claim to have information that all 177 are killed and buried at a place close to the Navalady military camp at Valiachchenai. During the 1990s, about 3,000 people, mostly Tamil youth and farmers, were reported missing in Batticaloa district.

According to the Jaffna Mothers Front about 600 persons, mainly youth, “disappeared” during the army's “Rivirasa” operation in 1995-96 under the Peoples Alliance government to retake the northern Jaffna peninsula from the LTTE. Several soldiers who were involved in the killings have been convicted and

© World Socialist Web Site

revealed the location of the graves at Chemmani on the outskirts of Jaffna town. The government ordered the excavation of the sites only after much delay.

Rightwing Sinhala extremists such as the Sinhala Heritage Party (SUP) have called for the immediate release of all military personnel charged over the murders connected to the Chemmani graves, saying it was essential to boost the morale of the armed forces.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site