

Following the massacre of Tamil detainees

SEP member speaks about his time in Sri Lankan "rehabilitation" camp

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On October 25, a racist mob invaded the Bindunuwewa Rehabilitation Centre near Bandarawela, 210 kilometres from Colombo, and attempted to hack to death all of the 41 Tamil detainees—24 died on the spot and 5 have since died from their injuries. Another 11 injured are still in hospital, some in a critical condition.

Many questions remain unanswered about the attack. The police and the Colombo media have tried to pin the blame on the inmates themselves for protesting over their continued detention and portray the massacre as the spontaneous action of local villagers. But the villagers have denied any involvement and told the WWS that the thugs were transported to the camp by vehicle from outside.

Selliah Rajkumar, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, was detained for seven months in the camp in 1997. Like others, he was held as a suspected member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. The SEP's political opposition to the LTTE's program is well known in Sri Lanka.

Rajkumar was first arrested in 1996 when he mistakenly boarded a bus bound for Arunapura, a village near the Eastern Province, rather than Anuradhapura, a city in North Central Province. The bus destination was written only in Sinhalese, and Rajkumar, like many Tamils, is unable to read that language. He was held for six months at the Aralaganwila police station where police tortured him on several occasions to try to force him to falsely confess to being an LTTE member.

Rajkumar was then taken to Bindunuwewa Rehabilitation Centre. He was finally released in July 1997 after a protracted campaign waged by the SEP and other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Even though Rajkumar was never tried in a court, let alone found guilty, he spent more than a year in detention as "an LTTE suspect".

Hundreds of Tamils are incarcerated, often on the flimsiest of pretexts, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act in detention camps and prisons across Sri Lanka. Bindunuwewa is a camp for prolonged detention. It had been a training centre for rural development officers and then for home guards (a police auxiliary force) then it was used to house Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) suspects during the United National Party government's reign of terror against Sinhalese youth in the late 1980s.

Now it is used to detain "LTTE suspects", mainly young Tamils arrested by the police or army during their military operations in the North and East. There are also a few Tamil-speaking youth from the central plantation districts. In the wake of last week's massacre, Information and Media Minister Anura Piyadarsana Yapa issued a statement describing the Bindunuwewa camp as "a role model in the sphere of rehabilitation" that had won "international acclaim". In this interview, Rajkumar describes the conditions and the regime in this "model camp".

During my stay at the camp there were 80 detainees—62 Tamils and 18 Sinhalese. Most of them were between the ages of 18 and 30 years of age.

Tamil detainees had been arrested in the Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Negombo and Polonnaruwa districts. Most of them had no connection with the LTTE. There was a youth who had been arrested and detained for the alleged "crime" of supplying water to the LTTE. There were also some LTTE deserters who were from areas under LTTE control.

One inmate told me how he was captured by the army. He was from Uduthurai in Jaffna. His brother had been killed by the LTTE who had branded him as a traitor. So this man had travelled by raft to see the army to complain. But the army took him into custody. After being detained for a few months in Jaffna he was sent to this rehabilitation camp.

All the detainees came from poor families who fished or farmed. Most of us just wanted to go home. There were two youth who had been released two years before I arrived. But they stayed at the detention centre as they had no way of getting back to Jaffna. They were allowed go out of the camp freely and worked at a bakery.

Some were always talking about their families. One person was the man who had been arrested for "supplying water to the LTTE". He was an inland fisherman who lived in extreme poverty. He was detained with me at the Aralaganwila police station. He had four children. His wife had to do housework to support the family. His 12-year-old son had to fish to earn money.

Rajkumar explained that even though the Tamil detainees were all supposed to be "LTTE suspects", the Bindunuwewa Rehabilitation Centre was a low security camp.

There were minimum security arrangements at the camp. The two policemen at the gate were not always there. Outsiders could visit the camp without being checked. Sometimes two police officers would visit the camp and then leave. This was probably because the authorities believed that they would not have any trouble from us. If anyone wanted to escape he could have easily done so.

Asked his opinion about the recent massacre at the camp, Rajkumar commented:

It is unbelievable that the inmates were killed by villagers. Some of the media has reported that the inmates teased girls in the village at the bathing place. But the detainees went to this place at a scheduled time when the villagers were not there. This kind of attack must be an organised one.

During my stay—and earlier also I was told—there were never any clashes between inmates and villagers. Relations with them were cordial. I remember during Vesak and other Buddhist festivals the inmates organised meals and other things for passers-by. They went to Bindunuwewa village and collected money for decorations at the camp, cool drinks, biscuits, etc. The camp is in an isolated place. Detainees who came from areas like Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Negombo had never visited this hill country before. The Sinhala villagers from surrounding areas used to guide us when we wanted to go somewhere.

Even though security was low-key at the centre, the officers used

physical violence against the detainees, as Rajkumar explained.

The Officer-in-Charge (OIC) at the time was the same man who was running the camp at the time of the murders and has now been suspended—Captain Ashoka Abeyratne. Just three days after my arrival, I was shocked by his actions.

A detainee from Mannampity was about to be released that morning. His relations had come to take him home. His travelling bag and other belongings were ready. Suddenly the OIC asked for his bag, searched it and found a pair of pliers. He then beat the detainee mercilessly with a piece of hose pipe filled with sand—in front of his relations. They were all crying. The youth said he did not know how these pliers had come to be in his bag. They were all finally allowed to go in the evening. Out of fear they made no complaint.

I came to know from others that Abeyratne kept this piece of hose pipe in his office to beat the detainees when he wanted to punish them.

Rajkumar outlined the regime at the camp and the nature of the “rehabilitation”.

The inmates used to get up around 3:30 a.m. and assemble at the prayer hall. After an hour of prayer and yoga exercises, the detainees had to go to a parade. All of them, including the Tamils, had to recite the national anthem in Sinhala whether they understood it or not. Then one of the detainees had to address the parade on a subject—some kind of “good advice”. We had to repeat a vow: “We will be faithful to the camp, we will utter no lies, we accept the program of the camp, we will be faithful to the OIC,” and so on. Whenever we came across a camp official we had to say “Shanthi” [“Peace of Mind” in Tamil] and “Budu saranai” [“May you have the blessings of Lord Buddha” in Sinhala] and clasp our hands together.

Before breakfast we had to clean the camp and tend the flower plots. There were two sessions of classes: two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. In the morning inmates were trained in electric wiring, carpentry and motors. But the training was a joke. In the electrical class, there was no proper wiring equipment: just seven electric bulb holders and the pieces of wire all joined together. When the detainees complained about the poor training, the officials promised to take action but no improvement took place. The so-called language classes in English, Sinhala and Tamil were in the afternoon. One English teacher came from outside. We had to teach Tamil and Sinhala ourselves.

In lectures and meetings, in the morning and evening, we were told about the happiness of family life, and that we should not get involved in “bad things”, as they said, like rebellion and protest. Captain Abeyratna took the initiative in giving “advice”. We had to believe in our god, as he was protecting us, Abeyratna said. All of this—the work, the yoga, the meetings, “advice” and so-called training—was aimed at making us think individualistically, and not politically.

Rajkumar commented that the Tamil detainees were concerned that the officials incited racist sentiments among the Sinhalese prisoners.

Among us there were also some Sinhala detainees. They were mainly drug addicts and had been detained, so it was said, to “rehabilitate” them. Some were almost paralysed. The classes were conducted for Tamils and Sinhalese separately. Some detainees told me they heard Abeyratne telling the Sinhala detainees: “It is better to join the army, kill an LTTEer and die, rather than taking drugs and getting ruined yourselves.”

He also spoke about an incident that directly related to the latest massacre—a threat to the Tamil detainees that any protest or insubordination would result in a mob attack by villagers.

Once there was a small quarrel between two Tamil inmates and two Sinhalese. I don't know the reason. But we settled it. However, the OIC immediately summoned a meeting and warned us: “If you engage in such things the Sinhalese living outside will come and cut you to pieces. You should stay here without giving any indications that you are Tamil.”

He wanted to intimidate us with racist threats. But the local people knew

that we were Tamils. The OIC and other officials tried to create suspicions about us. The Sinhala detainees [involved in the incident] went to the head office in Colombo, with the help of the camp chief, and complained that they could not live alongside us. The two Tamils were put in a dark room for about one week as punishment.

Rajkumar described the primitive conditions at the centre and the refusal of authorities to do anything to improve the camp.

What we were supplied for sleeping was one mat, a pillow and a bed sheet. We lived in two hall-like buildings. There were 40 in our building. We had no rooms. We were given a small portion of the hall to spread our mat and a small rack to keep belongings.

I was still suffering from the brutal torture at the Aralaganvila police station. But I was given no medical tests even though I was often vomiting blood and could not put on any weight. Others had also been given severe beatings by the police or army and they did not receive proper medical attention either. For small illnesses, we had to contend with the first aid at the camp. For serious illness we were taken to the government hospital at Bandarawela.

A few weeks before my release we were considering launching a protest. We had many complaints. We could not exchange letters with our relations. Abeyratne refused to post letters. He also opened and read incoming letters. Even registered letters were not delivered. The meals were very bad. The toilets were not in a usable condition. The main problem was there were some elderly detainees and also children as young as 12. So we demanded they should be released and given proper conditions.

When we told Abeyratne that we wanted to meet a higher official he refused. Later he had to bring a commissioner to the camp. We insisted on speaking to her without the OIC present and she agreed to release older detainees and the children three months early. But this was not implemented.

Rajkumar explained the impact of the ICFI's campaign in the camp.

In the beginning Abeyratne allowed SEP members to visit me, but then they were blocked. Visits were limited to family members. Even when an SEP lawyer talked to me, an official stayed there.

Abeyratna was well aware of the international campaign to release me. He wanted to prevent other detainees from knowing about it. So he prohibited any SEP representatives from meeting me. But ultimately the government and higher authorities were forced to release me. I told the other detainees about the developments in the campaign. Even though they did not join the party, some of them told me that they were impressed by this kind of a party.

My turn for giving the “Leader of the Day” speech following the national anthem came on Independence Day—February 4, 1997. In my 10-minute speech, I said: “All the parties commemorate independence day and say that Sri Lanka got its independence. But it is freedom for the capitalist class, not for workers and peasants.” I explained that no one could have democratic rights under conditions of war. Up until that time, some of the inmates had been teasing me, saying that all politicians were liars. Afterwards the teasing stopped, some praised me for my speech and they became very friendly.

The chief of the camp was not present that morning but he was informed about it by another official. That evening he pretended to praise me but I never got to give another “Leader of the Day” speech, even though my turn came up another three times.

After my release in July 1997 the detainees wrote to me eight times and I replied, but my replies did not reach them. In November 1997 the detainees organised a hunger strike demanding a reduction in the period of detention, the release of the teenagers and aged detainees, and the dropping of a plan to transfer the camp to Jaffna.

When it took place even foreign visitors were allowed to meet the hunger strikers. But when my wife and I appeared, Abeyratne shouted at

us, saying: “We can't allow you in! Get out!” When they saw me the hunger strikers came running towards us, but they were not allowed to speak to me. Abeyaratne had an official accompany us to the main road a kilometre away to make sure that we left the area.



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