

Campaign to release Sri Lankan detainees

Hatton Six face another year's jail without trial

Vilani Peiris
6 March 2001

Framed up on bombing charges, six young Tamil men from Sri Lanka's plantation districts went to court on February 15, only to have their case postponed by another 11 months. By the time their case is called again next January 16, the six detainees will have been imprisoned without trial for three and a half years.

This is the sixth time that the authorities have delayed the case, on various specious pretexts, since charging the detainees in May 1999. Before that, the Hatton Six were held for 13 months under the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), without even being brought to court.

This year, the case was due to be heard on January 26, but the judge was inexplicably "on duty leave" and the main prosecution witness, an assistant police superintendent who allegedly recorded "confessions" by the six, was also absent. The court announced that a new judge would be appointed and would fix fresh dates. On February 15, the replacement judge delayed the hearing until next January 16.

Even then, the prisoners have no guarantee that their case will not be postponed yet again. Thousands of Tamil youth are in detention camps and prisons throughout Sri Lanka, mostly held without trial under the PTA laws. This repression, part of the government's 18-year-old war against the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has intensified under the Peoples Alliance (PA) government over the past six years.

According to official reports, 13,514 Tamils were taken into custody under emergency regulations and the PTA between January and November 2000 alone. Some human rights groups put the number at 18,000. Though most were released after questioning, others were detained. The Centre for Human Rights, a non-government organisation, estimates that about 2,500 Tamils have been imprisoned in various detention centres. The locations include Jaffna in Northern Province, Batticaloa and Trincomalee in the Eastern province, and the prisons at Colombo, Kalutara, Boossa, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla and Kandy.

Police first arrested the Hatton Six shortly after a bomb attack at the Shannon tea factory near Hatton, in the central hills area,

on May 31, 1998. The authorities then alleged that the prisoners were responsible for six separate, unrelated bombings over a six-month period, involving five electricity transformers and an oil storage tank. The charges are based on "confessions" written in Sinhala, a language that the detainees cannot read or write, and signed by them after torture. The original charge was dropped without explanation over a year later.

The prosecuting lawyer for the Attorney General's Department has now informed the defence lawyers that one important government witness has abandoned the police service without notifying his whereabouts. The witness, a police sub-inspector named Mukadis, had been cited as the officer who translated the supposed confessions into Tamil and explained them to the prisoners. If this police officer is not available, the prosecution will have difficulty even claiming that the confessions were voluntary and that the prisoners understood what they were instructed to sign.

Nevertheless, the government is determined to keep these prisoners in jail as part of its repression against Tamils. The six are accused of being members of the LTTE and face prison terms of up to 20 years if found guilty of the bomb attacks.

The detainees—Suppu Udayakumar, Pichchamuththu Chandran, Arunasalam Yogeswaran, Solamalai Loganathan, Ponnaiah Saravanakumar and Samimuttu Benedict—all are from plantations near Hatton. Suppu Udayakumar is a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka and contested the 1997 local government election as a SEP candidate.

The SEP issued a statement in January renewing its call for a campaign for the immediate and unconditional release of the Hatton Six. Supporters of the campaign in Sri Lanka and internationally have already sent several letters to the Attorney General condemning the nature of arrests, the lengthy detention and the use of forced confessions.

In an effort to evade the campaign, the Attorney General has not answered any of these issues, sending a common reply instead, consisting of just one sentence: "We inform you that with regard to above suspects, indictments have been forwarded to the Kandy high court on 28/ 4/ 1999 through the files of EER/42/99/ABCD."

The SEP has widely distributed copies of its statement among workers, students, peasants and intellectuals, receiving some coverage in the Tamil media. On February 14, *Suriayan FM*, a Tamil language private radio service, reported that the *World Socialist Web Site* was campaigning to defend the six detainees.

A fortnightly Tamil language paper, *Saranihar*, which is published by a human rights organisation, reported: “No political party, trade union, NGOs or human rights group in the plantations has raised its voice for the release of these youth... For the release of these youth, a new international campaign has been started by the Socialist Equality Party. For details connect to the WSWWS.”

A well-known film and drama director in Sri Lanka, Dharmasiri Bandaranayaka, has written to the Attorney General, declaring: “As an artist, I am duty bound to join the campaign for the release of Hatton plantation youth. Keeping them detained for two and a half years, an untold attempt has been made to name them as criminals. The extraction of confessions and use of torture are in violation of human rights...We who value peace and human freedom do not agree with this repression and demand that attention be paid to the agitation to free the six plantation youth.”

M. Nesamany, a member of Christian Workers Fellowship from Hatton, wrote: “Pushing youths from various areas of Sri Lanka to prison for several years for offences they never committed, has become a normal practice now. Family members of those youths are subjected to unspeakable sufferings. I support the efforts of the Socialist Equality Party to secure their release and also urge you to speed up their release.”

In his letter to the Attorney General, Central Bank Employees Union president H.M.B. Herath demanded the release of the Hatton Six, stating: “The Central Bank Employees Union considers the continued detention of these youths as a serious blow to the basic democratic rights of the working class and the masses.”

M. Dharmasena, a member of the Union of Postal and Telecommunication Officers, urged the Attorney General to immediately drop the charges and declared: “This case is just one example of the attacks carried out by the government against workers.” A.W.J. Chandrasena, an employee of Sri Lanka Standards Institute, noted: “After holding them for a year, the original charge of bombing the tea factory was dropped. The only evidence consists of ‘confessions’ extracted by the police.”

Dharsana Medis, a Sri Lankan poet and art critic, stated: “The way these youths have been treated so far, is not only entirely anti-democratic but also disgraceful.”

A New York City member of the United Federation of Teachers, wrote: “I urge you to arrange for the immediate and unconditional release of the six Tamil plantation youth. The nature of their imprisonment is an outrage against human democratic rights. Charges against them were changed with the

original charges dropped. The only evidence against these young workers is forced ‘confessions’ which they signed that were written in Sinhala, a language none of them could read or write... The forced confessions and the unexplained charges and the lack of any other evidence mean that there is no case.

“The nature of civil war in general, and the racial nature of the civil war in Sri Lanka in particular, give rise to extreme violation of human rights, especially those of the working class and poor. An assault on workers' rights in Sri Lanka helps drive down the conditions and the rights of workers the world over. The arrest and continued imprisonment of these six are of consequence to workers anywhere in the world... I am joining the campaign to end this attack on democratic rights, and the racist war. Please do what is right by immediately freeing these six innocent workers and doing it without qualification.”

The latest postponement of the case against the Hatton Six adds to the urgency for other WSWWS readers to add their voices to this campaign.

Letters should be sent to:

The Attorney General
Attorney General's Department
Colombo 12
Sri Lanka
Fax: 0094-1-436421

Please refer to case numbers:

Kandy High Courts NJ 1290/99, NJ 1291/99, 1292/99 and NJ 1295/99

Please send copies to:

Socialist Equality Party
No 90
1st Maligakanda Lane
Colombo 10
Sri Lanka
Fax: 0094-75-354832

World Socialist Web Site
e-mail: editor@wsws.org



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact