

Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka appeal for support for their release

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Six young Tamils from the plantation districts of Sri Lanka, who have been held in detention for more than two years without trial, have written to the Socialist Equality Party thanking the party for its campaign for their release. The six appeared in court last month, only to have their trial delayed again for another 11 months until next January.

The letter signed by all six detainees stated: “We are confident that you will stand for our defence... In a situation where we are imprisoned since 1998 without bail, the postponement of our case for such a long period is an unjustified act imposed upon us by the Sri Lankan government.

“We appealed for the assistance of up-country political parties [organisations representing plantation workers] and we can't understand why they do not care about us...We do not know what we have to do in the courts to secure our freedom. As such we request you to take all necessary steps on our behalf.”

The six young men were arrested in early June 1998 following a bomb attack on a tea factory near Hatton in the central hill district of Sri Lanka. They were detained as “LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) suspects” under the country's repressive Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and subjected to interrogation and torture. In July 1999, police charged them with a series of other unrelated bomb attacks and, without explanation, dropped the initial allegation.

All six deny the charges. The only evidence against them are confessions extracted under torture and written in Sinhalese—a language none of them read or write. The case has now been postponed on six separate occasions. On January 26, the judge was absent on “duty leave” and the main prosecution witness was unavailable. On February 15, a replacement judge put off the case until January 16, 2002.

The six detainees are: Suppu Udayakumar, Pichchamuththu Chandran, Arunasalam Yogeswaran, Solamalai Loganathan, Ponnaiah Saravanakumar and Samimuttu Benedict.

They are currently being detained in the notorious Kalutara prison, 40 kilometres south of the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. In December 1997 and again in January 2000, prison authorities violently suppressed protests by Tamil political prisoners over the conditions in the jail—five were killed on each occasion and dozens were injured.

More than 300 Tamil prisoners are held in the jail under appalling conditions. Recently some of the detainees wrote to a human rights group complaining that conditions in the prison complex were getting worse. They said that excrement from the upper floor of block D was leaking into the level below. Many of the wards do not have lights. Letters sent by relatives are often subject to lengthy delays.

At a meeting organised by the Socialist Equality Party in Hatton on March 3, relatives of the detainees indicated their support for the party's campaign and offered to distribute the SEP's statement on the case to workers and their families. Several spoke to WSWs reporters about the detentions and the impact on their lives.

Chandran's father explained that the main reason for wife's death last June was her grief at the lengthy detention of their son. Udayakumar's grief-stricken elder sister also died in May 1999 and Saravanakumar's mother is suffering from a mental illness because of his arrest. Yogeswaran's brother committed suicide last December, unable to face the family's financial hardship.

Saravanakumar's father, Ponnaiah, a 58-year-old retired field officer, said his family now has no income.

Following his son's detention in June 1998, Ponniah met with P. Chandrasekaran, the leader of Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF), then a deputy minister, to complain about the arrest. He also met Arumugam Thondaman, a Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader and parliamentarian, for the same purpose. All that happened was that Chandrasekaran asked a lawyer to appear for Saravanakumar.

Udayakumar's father, 66, said his son was detained late at night by police who said they wanted to question him. The following day when his son did not return, he tried to find out from the police what had happened but to no avail. He only found out that his son was in police custody in Colombo through a newspaper. When he met with CWC leaders, they simply rebuked him, saying: "You say he has done nothing but police and newspapers say they had weapons. How do we know who is telling the truth?" They did not bother to try to find out the truth.

Chandran's father, P. Pichchamuththu, 66, told a similar story. "Our family can't live with our meagre income and sometimes we don't have money for meals. We had to spend money to see my son too." He met with National Union of Workers (NUW) officials but they refused to do anything, saying that it was not a problem of the plantations.

Detainee Yogeswaran was arrested in 1994 on similar charges. At the insistence of his lawyer, he pleaded guilty to the charge in return for a mitigated sentence—a fine of 6,000 rupees. His father, Arunasalam, explained that both the NUW and UPF leaders seized on the earlier charge as a pretext doing nothing. UPF leader told him: "As he has been taken into custody on a suspicion of being a Tiger [LTTE cadre] we can't do anything."

The SEP has received copies of new protest letters sent to Attorney General demanding the release of the Hatton six.

Professor George Cooray of the Department of the History and Political Science at the University of Colombo wrote: "I recently learned of the extension of the detention period (of these detainees) by another year... This is clearly a case where the government [is] using the provisions in the PTA to detain Tamil workers for long periods without trial. This is a gross violation of their fundamental rights and basic human rights. While conducting racist war against the Tamil

minority, the authorities are using the state of war as an excuse to violate the basic rights of workers."

Reverend S. Maria Anthony from the Centre for Social Concern wrote: "The case against the six is a blatant frame up. Forced confessions have taken place. Therefore I, on behalf of the Centre for Social Concern Hatton, urge your good self to release them unconditionally."

Secretary of the Ceylon Teachers Union, C. Jayathunga, wrote: "The Ceylon Teachers Union vehemently opposes the detention of the suspects violating their fundamental human rights under repressive laws including the PTA and demands [you] to take steps to release them soon."

Three plantation workers have also sent letters to the Attorney General demanding the release of the six: P. Rassiah and K. Kanapathy Pillai from the Norwood Upper Division of Norwood Plantations, and R. Muniandy, from the Dunbar estate near Hatton.

We urge all our readers in Sri Lanka and internationally to send letters of protest to the Sri Lankan Attorney General to demand the immediate and unconditional release of the Hatton six.

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

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