

Freed Tamil detainees speak:

"The conditions in Sri Lanka were exposed before the international community"

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Four Tamil detainees freed last month as a result of a campaign by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) spoke to the World Socialist Web Site about their experiences. They had been in jail without trial for more than three years after being accused of being members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and engaging in terrorist attacks in the Hatton area. The only evidence against them consisted of confessions extracted by police using torture.

The four are: Suppu Udayakumar, 29, Samimuththu Benedict, 27, Pitchchamuththu Chandran, 27, and Solamalai Loganathan, 33. Two more—Arunasalam Yogeshwaran and Ponnaiah Saravanakumar—are still in detention and the SEP is continuing the campaign for their immediate and unconditional release.

Speaking with determination and enthusiasm, they said: "We are very happy to be free again after such an ordeal under police and prison detention. We are now with our parents, relatives and the people. We didn't expect that we would come out alive. We went through terrible torture in police custody and faced two murderous attacks in the prisons. We were able to survive while some other detainees were killed in the prison. However, at last the Peoples Alliance (PA) government was compelled to set free us. This is a result of the campaign of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*."

The four wanted to explain how they were arrested and the torture they underwent: "We were arrested one at a time. Chandran was asked to visit the police station on June 6, 1998 and then detained. Udayakumar in the same manner went to the police station on June 11 and 12 and went back home. But about 11.30 or 12 in the night, a jeep sped to his home and arrested him. The others were also arrested on the same day.

"Then all of us were brought to the Special Investigations Unit at Kandy police station. There we were severely tortured. We were kept for a whole day with a hand and a leg tied to a table. We had no food on that day. I remember being assaulted by sub-inspector Rafaideen, sergeant Thennakoon and Fonseka and others of Kandy Police. After two days, we were forced to sign six typed sheets [of a statement]. We felt obliged to sign because they would subject us to more torture. Then we were kept at separate police stations.

"On June 15, we were brought to the Security Investigations Division of the police in Colombo. We underwent severe torture for three months there. A shopping bag dipped in petrol was tied

over our heads and we were then assaulted. We were suspended from an iron bar and our heads were dipped into a water tank. We were also beaten on the toes until we felt pain in the head. Another cruel treatment was making us keep heavy books upon our heads and then beating us to cause internal injuries. Our sexual organs were put into a drawer, which was then closed.

"Throughout the entire ordeal we were kept naked. We had to answer all the questions affirmatively. Saying "no" was prohibited. We were assaulted wantonly—early in the morning, at midnight, when we were eating and so on. If they [the police] were drunk at night then the torture became more severe. We did not have sufficient food. At times we had to plead for more food.

"Then they asked us to sign three or four typed sheets on September 3, 1998. We resisted until around 5pm, enduring all the tortures, but finally gave in. We knew that during the night we would be subject to the brutality of the drunkards. These were the documents that produced before the court as evidence that we had confessed to the allegations. On September 4 we were taken back to Hatton. Acting magistrate Rajendran met us on his way home and issued the detention order without even a glance at us.

"Since then we have been languishing for three years in the jail. We suffered severe ailments due to the torture. Udayakumar had to be admitted to Colombo general hospital for five days as he was bleeding from his sexual organ. Saravanakumar was put into the Kalutara hospital for psychiatric treatment. Even now we have problems in breathing, we can't concentrate when reading and our limbs are not functioning well."

The four went on to describe life in the prisons.

"First we were detained at the Bogambara Prison in Kandy. Then the political prisoners were kept separately. But later we were put together with convicted criminals. We had to wait until they finished washing or other things. When we went to the toilet sometimes toilet buckets from the upper floor would be spilt over us but we could not wash ourselves because there was not enough water.

"Conditions at Kalutara prison were worse. It was a hellhole. The wastes from the upstairs toilet seeped into downstairs. The stench was unbearable. There were plenty of bugs. D ward had been built for 35, but they packed it with 74 detainees. Though the D2 ward was built for 30, it had 46 detainees herded into it. The other wards were the same.

“The walls of some wards were on the brink of collapse. The prison officers often bragged about killing 40-50 prisoners. They said it happened when an old wall fell on top of prisoners.

“No medicine is available at Kaluthara prison. Only aspirin or Vitamin B is prescribed for fever, colds, headaches, stomach aches and even for blood pressure. Earlier, we could buy prescribed drugs from outside pharmacies but recently the prison superintendent banned it.

“During an organised attack by guards at Kalutara prison in January last year, two detainees died and nearly 200 were injured, some critically. The brutal assault on unarmed detainees was aimed at breaking up the protests of political prisoners over the previous two months.

“We didn’t know about the attack on the first day. It had happened in a ward that we could not see. They [the prison authorities] wanted to break up a fast carried on by the detainees in ward F. An inmate named Jesudasn had been killed. We only came to know about it through the evening radio news.

“Next day, on January 7, we asked the officers about the incident. But superintendent Kulathunga came to the ward and shouted ‘charge’. The Kalutara prison guards, together with officers from Colombo, broke into the ward carrying guns and started assaulting us. Sirikumara had been fasting. When he came forward he was shot to death. Pallikumar was slashed with a sword. About 10 guards assaulted Kannakumar with iron rods. From then on he was mentally unbalanced. Gunasekaran’s leg was broken. Human rights organisations visited us and compiled reports but there were no results.”

When asked about the other detainees, they said: “All were detained under the PTA [Prevention of Terrorism Act]. The common charge was being a member of the LTTE. There were detainees who had been languishing there for six or seven years, as the authorities postpone legal cases regularly. Gunasekaran has been in there for six years. Weerasamy from Awissawella has been in there for six years. In all there are about 600 detainees.”

The four were bitter about the role of the leaders of the plantation workers unions, which in Sri Lanka also function as political parties.

“On 1 December 1999 we started a fast. We demanded the authorities either file a case or release us. Although the prison officers tried to force us to stop, we carried on. P. Chandrasekaran, leader of the Up Country Peoples Front and a former parliamentarian visited us. He promised to solve the problem within 15 days after a discussion with the Attorney General. He also promised to intervene to improve the prison conditions. So we stopped the fast. But he did nothing.”

Asked about the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and its leader Arumugam Thondaman, Udayakumar said: “When I was arrested earlier in 1994 he [Thondaman] told my parents that he couldn’t do a thing as I had been arrested as an LTTE suspect. So my parents did not contact him this time. But other parents went to him. He said he had given the case to another man in the union. He demanded 1,000 rupees and then these parents gave up asking for the CWC’s support.

“That was the usual practice with the CWC. To meet Thondaman you have to bribe the man downstairs. Ultimately

when you meet Thondaman, he won’t do a thing. People in the plantations usually face this situation,” he said.

Asked about his attitude to the war, Udayakumar commented: “We were accused of being LTTE members. The war is a weapon to suppress workers’ and poor people’s rights. The LTTE cannot solve the problems of the Tamil people by holding discussions with capitalist governments and parties. The LTTE also has a capitalist program.”

Speaking about the situation facing young Tamils, Udayakumar said: “The education in the plantations is backward relative to other areas. There are no facilities at estate schools. Children feel, at a very young age, that they have been degraded. Many children have mental problems.

“There is no assurance of getting a job in plantations after leaving school. After the privatisation [of the plantations] there was no job assurance, even if you are qualified. Some estates have been sold to other businesses. Only the profitable estates are being maintained. There will be no job opportunities in the plantations in the next five to ten years. Most plantation youth do not possess national identity cards and so they cannot find jobs outside the plantation areas.

“Our own story reveals the problems. Loganathan passed the first exam for the university. He was first arrested when preparing for his finals. His education stopped there and then. He doesn’t have a job. Chandren passed the general certificate of education, advanced level (GCE-AL) but he cannot find a proper job. I wrote for the GCE (Ordinary Level) in the prison and failed. We all were working as labourers when we were arrested. Sarawanakumar wanted to become a priest, after the GCE (O/L) but then he was arrested.”

Speaking about his release, Udayakumar said: “After three years the Attorney General’s department had to withdraw charges against us. Our release was possible because of the campaign carried out by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the SEP. A special feature of the campaign was to expose the discrimination against Tamils in Sri Lanka. When an international campaign took place through the WWS, the conditions in Sri Lanka were exposed before the international community. Because of the campaign to release us, the consciousness of people has been raised.

“The difference between other organisations and the SEP is this: the SEP approaches problems from the interests of the workers and oppressed. So the SEP wholeheartedly fights for democratic rights.”

All four thanked those who supported the campaign. “We want to thank the WWS and the SEP for campaigning on behalf of our release with such dedication. At the same time, we give our utmost gratification to all those who took a stand for our democratic rights even without seeing us.”



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