

Sri Lankan SEP demands the release of two Tamil detainees

Vilani Peiris**21 February 2002**

Two young Tamil plantation workers, Arunasalam Yugeswaran and Ponniah Sarawanakumar, who have been detained without trial on bogus charges for three and a half years, are due to appear today in the Kandy High Court in central Sri Lanka.

The two were arrested in the Hatton area in June 1998 under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), along with four other Tamil youth—Suppu Udayakumar, Pitchamuthu Chandran, Solamalai Yoganathan and Samimuththu Benedict. At the time, the police alleged that the six had carried out a bombing of one of the tea factories in the area.

The six were severely tortured and held for a year without charge or trial. When the police finally laid charges the initial accusation was dropped and others substituted, including the bombing of electricity transformers and a petrol tank. They were also accused of being members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The only evidence against any of the six were the "confessions" that had been obtained by torture. These documents were not written in Tamil but in Sinhala, a language that the detainees neither read nor write. Aware of the weakness of its case, the prosecution stalled and repeatedly delayed any hearing.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has waged a concerted campaign both in Sri Lanka and internationally through the *World Socialist Web Site* to demand the immediate and unconditional release of all six detainees. The party also provided legal assistance for the young men.

As a result of the growing support for the campaign, the Sri Lankan authorities were compelled to release four of the six on July 31 last year. The Attorney General dropped the charges on the basis of medical examinations carried out after their detention. The

decision was a tacit admission that the detainees had been tortured to obtain confessions and that there was no other evidence.

Two of the six were not released, however. The charges against Loganathan and Sarawanakumar were identical and the case against them was no stronger than against the other four. The state lawyer insisted that they remain in detention because their medical reports were not available. On this threadbare pretext, the two Tamils have been held in jail for another six months. It should be noted that it is the responsibility of the state to obtain the reports.

The SEP's lawyer submitted the medical reports to the Attorney General on August 8 last year and demanded their immediate release. He pointed out: "They have been further remanded in spite of the fact that the JMO has found torture [has been] inflicted on these two prisoners as well." The case has subsequently been set down for hearing on three occasions, but in each instance the State Counsel has asked for more time.

The continued detention without trial of Loganathan and Sarawanakumar is a blatant case of discrimination and an abuse of democratic rights. But it is just one of many. As part of its war against the LTTE, the Sri Lankan security forces carry out a policy of systematic harassment in order to intimidate the country's Tamil minority. Thousands of Tamils have been detained as "LTTE suspects" on the flimsiest of pretexts and held in jail for months and years without trial. Torture and other forms of abuse are standard practice.

Hundreds of Tamil political prisoners announced a hunger strike on February 1 demanding that they either be put on trial or released. Detainees at most prisons including Kalutara, Boossa, Bogambara, Jaffna and Batticaloa took part in the fast. While some of the main

Tamil parties appear to have encouraged the protest, they were also concerned to limit any action in order to save the United National Party (UNP) government any embarrassment.

In the elections last year, Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and a faction of Eelam People's Liberation Front (EPRLF) formed an electoral bloc—the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). The TNA is now backing, but not part of, the government.

None of these parties have taken more than a nominal interest in the fate of Tamil detainees previously. On this occasion they addressed a letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga calling for the release of Tamil political prisoners and declaring: “[T]here is no evidence against the majority of the Tamil political prisoners.”

At the same time, however, TNA MP and ACTC leader, A. Vinayagamurthi, accompanied by UNP MP, Maheshwaran, rushed to the Kalutara prison on the day of the hunger strike for urgent discussions with prison officials. The Superintendent of Prisons made a vague promise to the effect that Tamil political prisoners would be released soon—a decision he has no authority to make—and the fast was called off.

The leader of the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF), P. Chandrasekaran, had visited the detainees before the hunger strike and urged them not to go ahead, promising he would work for their release. The UPF, which is based among Tamil plantation workers, was part of the previous Peoples Alliance (PA) government and switched allegiance to join the new UNP administration. Chandrasekaran currently holds a ministerial post.

None of these parties have waged a consistent campaign in defence of the basic democratic rights of the hundreds of Tamil detainees. All of them have accommodated themselves to the atmosphere of extreme Sinhala chauvinism whipped up by successive governments in the course of the brutal 19-year civil war. Their newfound concern for Tamil detainees is related to their efforts to boost their image which has been tarnished by years of opportunist manoeuvring between the UNP and PA.

The SEP is continuing its campaign on behalf of

Loganathan and Sarawanakumar. A young person from the northern city of Jaffna, Sampanthan, recently wrote to the Attorney General demanding their release. Others who have backed the SEP campaign include: Jeevarajah from Hatton, a Tamil group called “Organisation to Reawaken Masses,” and Andrew Morris from Britain.

“I wish to add my voice of protest and that of my family and friends to the continued injustice perpetrated on innocent young Tamils. It is obvious that the PTA laws are being used in a racist civil war against basic democratic rights and in violation of international human rights,” Morris wrote.

The SEP appeals to workers, youth and intellectuals in Sri Lanka and internationally to write to the Attorney General to protest against the anti-democratic methods employed by the government and to call for the immediate and unconditional release of the two Tamil detainees.

Send your letters to:
The Attorney General,
Department of Attorney General,
Colombo 12
Sri Lanka
Fax: 0094-1-436421

Please refer to case numbers: NJ/1290/99, NJ/1291/99, NJ/1292/99 and NJ/1295/99 in Kandy High Courts.

Send a copy of your letter to:
Socialist Equality Party,
P.O. Box 1270, Colombo,
Sri Lanka.
Fax: 0094-74-612587.

E-mail: editor@wsws.org



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
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