

A letter on the detention of refugees in Australia

16 March 2002

The following letter was sent to the WSWs in response to the article “A first-hand account: Life inside an Australian refugee detention centre”, published on February 7, 2002.

Dear Editor,

I would like to thank your site for the revealing article on the conditions inside a detention centre for asylum seekers in Australia.

It brought back vivid memories of my own experiences in Sri Lanka. I have visited various detention camps, prisons, remand prisons, army camps and police stations where hundreds of Tamils accused of being members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are held indefinitely.

These political prisoners are being treated atrociously. Tamil youths who have been rounded up by the security forces, allegedly for involvement in terrorist activities, are routinely tortured and held in detention for indefinite periods. The Emergency Laws and Prevention of Terrorism Act provide the legal basis for indefinite incarceration, which cannot be challenged in courts of law.

The torture continues until they sign concocted confessions, which are used in evidence against them in courts. In October 2000, 27 young Tamil detainees were massacred inside a “rehabilitation” camp. Killing Tamil prisoners has been a common phenomenon in Sri Lanka since the war began in 1983. Last year alone, whilst in detention, three Tamil women were raped by the security forces.

The physical conditions in the places where they are detained are horrendous. The cells or bunkers used for detention sometimes do not have toilets. In some instances persons are detained in toilets. Even at Kalutara prison, which is the newest, purpose-built prison, the detainees are accommodated in empty halls with no beds and no privacy. The inmates have to sleep

on the floor on mats.

In 1994, I visited a Special Task Force camp in a remote village of Akkaraipattu on the east coast of Sri Lanka where about 25 Tamil “suspects”, some only 16 or 17 years old, were kept in a cage-like cell, which in fact was a concrete bunker. The detainees were only wearing underpants. Their heads were shaven. The cell smelt of human urine and faeces. They had been there for months and hadn’t ever had a visit by a lawyer. They did not have any idea when or if they were going to be released. Their relatives could not visit them, due to the isolated location of the camp. There were signs of torture on their bodies and their minds. The bunker had an iron-barred door exposing the detainees to the sea wind. They were treated as a human shield in case of an attack. I will never forget the conditions of this cell for as long as I live.

The traumas that these young men experienced made them distrustful, insecure, aggressive and at times brought about complete nervous breakdowns. Most of these youths broke down in tears within a few minutes of a conversation.

The torment does not stop with the detainees. Their families suffer enormously. By locking up fathers and sons—the main breadwinners—their wives and children are reduced to poverty. Marriage breakups, the disruption of children’s education, mental and physical illnesses and suicides are common in the North and East of Sri Lanka due to the stresses of indefinite incarceration. There have been cases in which whole families have been detained.

When someone is held in detention in the South, their desolate mothers, wives, fathers and other relatives dare not visit them for fear of being arrested as well.

Most of the detainees are not prisoners of war or combatants. The manner in which the Sri Lankan government treats these “LTTE suspects” exposes the

brutal, inhuman nature of the 18-year long civil war against the Tamil population. The callous behaviour of the Sri Lankan security forces towards the detainees is bound up with the efforts to intimidate an entire population in order to win the war.

No doubt Australian Prime Minister Howard would object to any suggestion that the experiences of these Tamil detainees in any way resembles his government's treatment of asylum seekers locked up in detention centres such as Maribrynong and Woomera. The comparison is not so far fetched, however.

True, the Australian government does not hold refugees in toilets and concrete bunkers and does not employ systematic physical torture. The detainees are supplied with the basics—food, clothing and a bed—as are convicted criminals jailed in the prison system.

What struck me about your article was the similarity in the psychological stresses, which, in my experience, are just as devastating in their impact on detainees as the physical conditions. Being treated like a criminal when you are not, not knowing when you will be released, being constantly subjected to humiliations and restrictions, not being able to communicate with your loved ones and relatives, watching your children suffer and grow listless—all of these things over months and years eat away at the spirit.

I read in your article that the Australian authorities are adopting measures such as:

- * Disrupting the sleep of detainees in the middle of the night
- * Depriving detainees of the right to communicate freely with each other
- * Censoring newspapers

These have only one purpose: to harass and intimidate refugees in order to prevent any resistance. Taken together with the protracted isolation and uncertainty, there is only one description for such a system—it is one of psychological torture. It seeks to crush the detainees by denying them any sense of hope in their lives.

Like the regime in Colombo, the Australian government is flouting basic international conventions on human rights. Its barbaric and racist treatment of people whose only “crime” has been to flee from political and economic oppression deserves to be condemned.

Yours truly,

KA,
Australia



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