

# Detention of three leftists by Sri Lankan government signals new round of state repression

By Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)  
12 March 2007

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that the Sri Lankan government's detention of three leftists last month and subsequent arrest of more than a hundred workers and youth is the preparation for open state repression against the working class. As it escalates its deeply unpopular war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Rajapakse government is seeking to intimidate and suppress opposition among ordinary working people, who are being forced to bear the economic burden of the conflict.

The military seized the three men on February 5. Nihal Serasinghe, a typesetter, was abducted in central Colombo; Lalith Seneviratne was dragged from his home by armed men that night, while Sisira Priyankara, a railway worker, was arrested later at night at the gate of the main railway complex at Dematagoda in Colombo. The three had been involved in producing *Akuna*, a bi-monthly journal of the Railway Workers Combine (RWC), a trade union formed a decade ago.

Hundreds of railway workers and journalists held a demonstration on February 6 in Colombo to protest the abductions and several trade unions threatened to take strike action. Military authorities first claimed that they had no knowledge of the three men. On the night of February 6, however, the defence ministry posted a statement on its website acknowledging that the three "LTTE suspects" were in military custody.

The statement announced that the suspects had confessed to receiving military training at LTTE bases in Kilinochchi. The military also claimed to have "found a cache of weapons hidden at several locations in Colombo", including high explosives, automatic rifles, claymore mines and electronic detonators.

At a press conference the following day, senior government and military spokesmen displayed videoed "confessions" in which the three admitted to travelling to LTTE-held areas twice, in late 2004 and early 2005. They named others involved and confessed to organising bomb attacks in Colombo and elsewhere, and having plans for future attacks. The three stated that they were engaged in organising the "Revolutionary Liberation Organisation (RLO)" to carry out a revolution in the Sri Lankan south with the LTTE's help.

Many unanswered questions remain about these "confessions". Serasinghe, Seneviratne and Priyankara are being held without charge or proper access to lawyers, family and the media under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The three were finally brought before a magistrate's court on March 7, but not allowed to speak to anyone. Family members are allowed to visit the detainees only once a week and then only in the presence of police.

The most striking feature of the confessions is that they were extracted in less than 48 hours, providing the government and the military with lurid material for a press conference—the first ever held on any of the many detentions carried out. There are only three possible explanations: the admissions were extracted by torture, or they were the confessions of agents provocateurs, or a combination of the two. In the course of Sri Lanka's protracted civil war, military intelligence and various police agencies have perfected all of these techniques.

The government insists, not only that all the detainees are "Tiger terrorists" but that its critics are "aiding the enemy". The communal character of its position was revealed in a defence ministry statement attacking those who took part in the February 6 protest as "pro-terror media hooligans and other anti-Sri Lankan movements that depend on LTTE blood cash."

In a similar vein, the Sinhala extremists of the JVP and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) have denounced the three detainees as "Sinhala Koti" or "Sinhala Tigers"—that is ethnic Sinhalese connected to the LTTE—a term of abuse frequently hurled at any opponent of the government's war. The JVP reproduced sections of the "confessions" in its paper *Lanka*. An associated article demanded further arrests, declaring: "The security sources have said more persons are to be arrested. Among them are NGO chiefs, so-called journalists who say free media persons and NGO leftists."

JHU leader Champika Ranawaka, now a member of the Rajapakse cabinet, issued a vicious statement calling for further anti-democratic measures and the elimination of anyone opposing the war. "Are you asking us to leave those (opposing the war) alive? Those bastards are traitors. We can't do anything because of wild donkey freedom in this country ... If we can't suppress those bastards with the law, we need to use any other ways and means," he told the *Ravaya* newspaper.

The security forces have already used the confessions of Serasinghe, Seneviratne and Priyankara to target plantation workers and youth in particular. Serasinghe was taken to the Nuwara Eliya district in the middle of the island's tea estate area to point out his "contacts". Three teachers and two students—all Tamils—were arrested. They were members of the Maoist New Democratic Party (NDP) and receiving weapons training from the LTTE.

Sarath Kumara Fernando, president of the Railway Workers Combine and the Railway Trade Union Federation (RTUF), has surrendered to police and is currently being held in the Boossa detention centre. Priyantha Nihal Gunaratne, who is also accused of being part of the conspiracy, was arrested on February 13 by

Ratnapura police. He was tortured by suspending him by his arms and as a result has an injured wrist.

Since February 17, police have rounded up and interrogated around 400 Tamil workers and youth in cordon-and-search operations at several estates. Of those, 109 have been sent to a detention camp at Boossa in the southern district of Galle and 30 young people are being held at various police stations. Extra police and soldiers were called in to carry out these dragnet operations. Some of those arrested were involved in demonstrations against the Upper-Kotmale hydroelectricity project and police are now focussing on this protest campaign.

The targeting of Tamil-speaking plantation workers is no accident. Half a million tea and rubber estate workers, in many cases in defiance of their union, struck for two weeks in December to demand a pay rise. The strike provoked a crisis for the government, which was desperate to prevent other sections of workers from making similar demands. Rajapakse provocatively declared that the strike posed the threat of “LTTE terrorists infiltrating the plantations”.

In a sinister development on March 1, the defence ministry issued a statement declaring that “law enforcement authorities” had the right to arrest and interrogate any individual “directly or indirectly engaging in activities threatening national security”. The statement particularly targetted those protesting against arbitrary arrests, disappearances and the abuse of democratic rights. “Protests and influences that are initiated in the wake of arrests of individuals not only hinder investigations but also threaten the stability of the government,” it emphasised.

By declaring illegitimate protests that “threaten the stability of the government”, the statement opens the door for a wholesale attack on any and all political opposition. The Rajapakse government is already in deep political crisis. It rests on a highly unstable coalition of parliamentary parties and confronts broad opposition from working people over deteriorating living standards. Incapable of resolving the social crisis, Rajapakse is deliberately whipping up Sinhala chauvinism and escalating the war against the LTTE to divide working people along communal lines. Increasingly isolated and fractured, the government is now preparing to use “national security” as the pretext for imposing what amounts to a police state.

This is not the first time that the Sri Lankan government has employed such methods. In 1989-1990, the United National Party government, in the name of suppressing the JVP, unleashed a wave of repression against Sinhala rural youth in the south of the island. An estimated 60,000 young people either “disappeared” or were murdered by the security forces and their associated death squads.

In the period prior to the signing of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, tens of thousands of Tamils were rounded up under the PTA, held for months, if not years, without trial, and in some cases badly tortured. After President Mahinda Rajapakse won office in the November 2005 election, the security forces were again let off the leash. For months, the military and its allied paramilitary groups engaged in a dirty war of provocation against the LTTE, prominent TNA figures and the Tamil minority as a whole. Abductions, disappearances and unsolved murders once again became the order of the day. Last July, Rajapakse ordered the military onto the offensive in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, and the army has seized LTTE-held territory at Mavilaru, Sampur and Vaharai.

Rajapakse’s turn to war against the LTTE has been accompanied by increasingly anti-democratic measures directed against the Tamil minority, the media and his political opponents. The continuing

abductions and killings have provoked a wave of protest inside Sri Lanka and internationally. In early August 2006, in the midst of fighting in eastern Sri Lanka, 17 local aid workers attached to the French-based Action Contre la Faim (ACF) were found shot dead, execution-style, at the organisation’s compound in Muttur. After conducting its own investigations, the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire, formally ruled on August 30 that the military was responsible for the murders.

The SEP is conducting its own campaign inside Sri Lanka and through the *World Socialist Web Site* to demand the police apprehend and prosecute the killers of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas, who was shot dead at his home at Mullipothana. All the evidence to date indicates that he was murdered by members of the Sri Lankan military, the police or allied paramilitary groups. The police are yet to conduct any serious inquiry into this cold-blooded political killing.

The detention of Serasinghe, Seneviratne and Priyankara and their “confessions” have come at a particularly convenient time for the Rajapakse government and the military. Both are desperate to divert domestic and international demands for inquiries into the hundreds of killings and abductions. In more than a year, the police have not apprehended or charged a single person.

The SEP calls on all sections of the Sri Lankan working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—to oppose the government’s deepening state repression. We demand the release of all political prisoners and the abolition of all anti-democratic and discriminatory measures, including the PTA and emergency powers.

The starting point for any genuine struggle against war, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights is the rejection of all forms of chauvinism and communalism—whether the Sinhala chauvinism of the Sri Lankan state or the Tamil separatism of the LTTE. The working class cannot take a step forward unless it recognises that all workers share common class interests and concerns that are diametrically opposed to those of the various ruling elites, who have exploited racism for more than half a century to maintain their rule.

The SEP calls for the building of a political movement of the working class and oppressed masses that is independent of all the establishment parties and based on socialist and internationalist principles. Such a movement must demand the immediate withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East, which have been under virtual military occupation for three decades. It must fight for the establishment of a workers and peasants government and for the formation of Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka-Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

Above all, the SEP urges workers and young people to study the analysis and program of our international party—the International Committee of the Fourth International—which is presented daily on the *World Socialist Web Site*, and make the decision to join its ranks.



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