Sri Lankan SEP demands urgent inquiry into disappearance of party member

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
26 March 2007

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) demands that the Sri Lankan government conduct an urgent investigation into the disappearance of SEP member, Nadarajah Wimaleswaran, and his friend, Sivanathan Mathivathanan, who have been missing since Thursday evening. All the evidence to date points to the involvement of the navy, which controls the northern islands near Jaffna, where both men live.

Nadarajah Wimaleswaran

The SEP has grave concerns for the safety of the two men and holds the government responsible for their well-being. Hundreds of people have been abducted, "disappeared" or killed by the military and associated paramilitaries in the North and East over the past year since President Mahinda Rajapakse plunged the country back to civil war.

Wimaleswaran, 27, a fisherman, has been a member of the SEP since 1998. He is known throughout the area as a political opponent of the war, and a defender of the rights of working people. He has a three-year-old child and his wife, Sivajini, is pregnant with their second child. Wimaleswaran's friend, Mathivathanan, 24, is married with two children.

On March 22, after finishing the day's fishing on the island of Kayts, Wimaleswaran rode on the back of his friend's motorbike to the village of Madathuveli on the neighbouring island of Punguduthivu. He wanted to collect some clothes from a house he had rented recently in Madathuveli and where he was planning to move. Kayts and Punguduthivu are connected by a 3.8 kilometre-long causeway across shallow waters. Each end has a roadblock manned by armed navy personnel.

Wimaleswaran and Mathivathanan passed through the roadblock at the Kayts end at about 5.30 p.m. The two arrived at the house in Madathuveli and were seen by people there. Wimaleswaran spoke to a relative Arul and a friend Kumaran who saw the two men leave at about 6.30 p.m. heading back to Kayts. Neither man arrived home, and Mathivathanan's motorbike—a Bajaj brand, number plate NPMR 2098—has also disappeared.

After hearing of the disappearance on Friday, the SEP immediately lodged formal complaints at the Gotaimbara naval camp on Punguduthivu and the Velanai naval camp on Kayts Island. The commanding officers—Hemantha Peiris at Punguduthivu and Silva at Velanai—both denied arresting Wimaleswaran and Mathivathanan and declared that they knew nothing about the men's disappearance.

On Saturday, the SEP registered a formal demand with the Ministry of Defence in Colombo for an urgent inquiry into the whereabouts of the two men. SEP members in the northern town of Jaffna have also lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission.

On Saturday morning, the Gotaimbara commanding officer Peiris asked Arul to tell Wimaleswaran's wife to come and see him. When Sivajini, her father and SEP members arrived at the gate to the camp, a naval soldier angrily told them that the navy had not arrested the pair.

The soldier accused the two men of being members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and said that they had fled to the LTTE-controlled Wanni area—well to the south across open waters patrolled by the navy. The naval soldier, a Tamil, was well aware who Wimaleswaran was. He used Wimaleswaran's nickname, Jeeva, and indicated that he also knew Mathivathanan and other members of his family.

After calling the naval soldier inside, commanding officer Peiris appeared at the gate. He told those present that the navy had not arrested Wimaleswaran and his friend, but failed to explain why he had summoned Wimaleswaran's wife to the camp. He said nothing about the soldier's allegations.

The encounter is deeply disturbing. The claim that Wimaleswaran is an LTTE member is false, and a slander, commonly used by the military to justify their repressive methods. The SEP is well known, particularly on Kayts Island, for its political opposition to the LTTE's separatist program,

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and Wimaleswaran has been an active SEP member all of his adult life.

On Saturday evening, the SEP again approached Commanding Officer Peiris for information. He said that the register on the Punguduthivu side of the causeway showed Wimaleswaran and friend had passed through the roadblock at 6.30 p.m. Peiris insisted that any arrest without his knowledge was impossible. Silva, the commanding officer at the Velanai camp, claimed that no arrest had taken place on the Kayts side.

Such denials count for nothing. The security forces routinely disclaim any involvement in abductions, disappearances and murders even when there is strong evidence to the contrary. Hundreds of cases have taken place over the past year, yet no military personnel have been charged, let alone prosecuted. The seizure of individuals at military roadblocks has become quite common.

As the war has intensified, the navy has tightened its control over Kayts and neighbouring islands, which are strategically located near the northern Jaffna peninsula. The navy has several High Security Zones surrounding its key bases and has subjected fishermen in the area to severe restrictions, accusing them of assisting LTTE infiltration and attacks by sea. A ban on fishing at sea has deprived many fishermen of their livelihood.

The navy operates in direct collaboration with the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) to intimidate the local Tamil population. The EPDP is a partner in Rajapakse's coalition government, but also functions as an armed paramilitary, enforcing its dictates on Kayts and neighbouring islands.

The SEP has a long history of political struggle on Kayts Island against the government and military as well as the LTTE. It is the only party demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East and campaigning to unite all workers—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—to fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

The SEP has been targetted by both sides for championing the rights of working people and opposing all forms of communal politics—the Sinhala chauvinism of the Colombo governments and the Tamil separatism of the LTTE. In March 2000, a local EPDP politician and his armed thugs threatened and physically assaulted SEP members on Kayts who had boycotted a meeting called to impose fishing restrictions.

After the signing of the 2002 ceasefire, the LTTE issued death threats against SEP members, whom it regarded as obstacles to establishing its political dominance in the area. In October 2002, the LTTE attempted to kill SEP member N. Kodeeswaran, as it attempted to compel him and other SEP members to hand over the funds of the Ampihainagar Fishermen's Cooperative Union which they had founded. When the country plunged back into war last year, the EPDP and its thugs returned to Kayts under the protection of the navy.

Amid rising popular discontent over the war and deteriorating living standards, the government and the military have not hesitated to use the most ruthless methods against their political opponents. On August 7 last year, SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas was murdered at Mullipothana in the eastern district of Trincomalee, amid sharp fighting in the neighbouring Muttur area. From the evidence gathered so far, it appears the military or one of its associated paramilitaries was responsible. Following his murder, the local military also spread the lie that Mariyadas was an LTTE supporter.

In this context, the disappearance of Wimaleswaran and his friend is deeply troubling. The refusal of the military to provide any adequate explanation of events in an area under its firm control constitutes strong circumstantial evidence of its complicity. The SEP urges our supporters in Sri Lanka and WSWS readers around the world to demand that the government conduct an urgent and thorough investigation in order to locate and release the two men.

Letters can be sent to:

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