

Sri Lankan navy commander stonewalls inquiry into disappearance of SEP member

Our correspondents

17 August 2007

In a disturbing new development in the disappearance of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend, Sivanathan Mathivathanan, in northern Sri Lanka, a navy commander has flatly refused to provide details of personnel on duty at the time at a key road block.

Wimalaswaran and Mathivathanan were last seen riding on a motor bike toward the road block on Kayts Island on March 22 via a long causeway from the neighbouring island of Punguduthivu. The two men were returning to Kayts after picking up some clothes from a village on Punguduthivu to attend a wedding that night.

The navy, which has a heavy presence throughout these northern islands, maintains a checkpoint at either end of the causeway. Wimalaswaran and Mathivathanan were seen at about 5 p.m. at the Velanai entry point on Kayts and then at the Punguduthivu navy checkpoint at about 6.30 p.m., restarting the motorbike to return to Velanai. Given that there is nowhere else to go on the causeway, the two men must have reached the Velanai checkpoint shortly afterward.

At a hearing at the magistrate courts on Kayts Island on August 3, police told the court that the commanding officer in charge of the Kanchadeva or Velanai navy camp denied that a road block even existed at the causeway entry point. The Kayts police had repeatedly stalled interviewing the commanding officers at the Velanai and Punguduthivu camps, and only finally acted after being directed at a previous hearing on July 27 to produce a witness list.

Sub inspector Saranapala from Kayts produced a letter in court from his headquarters inspector (HQI), stating: "Although the Commanding Officer of the Kanchadeva camp was informed by me to produce before the Kayts police, [a list of] officers at the Velanaithurai road block mentioned in the fresh statement of the complainant, I have been informed by the Commanding Officer that no such road block is being maintained at the said place."

The officer's claim is simply false. In a statement to police, Wimalaswaran's sister, Chithrakumar Jeyachithra, stated that she saw Wimalaswaran and Mathivathanan at the Velanai checkpoint at about 5 p.m. while returning from Punguduthivu with her husband. She saw the two men being body searched by navy officers and questioned by two plainclothes intelligence officers.

In his letter to the court, the police HQI dismissed Jeyachithra's statement as well as that of Selvadurai Ranjuthan, also known as Arul, who saw Wimalaswaran and Mathivathanan restarting their

motorbike at Punguduthivu checkpoint before heading onto the causeway back to Kayts. "Nothing was revealed about the said disappeared persons by the statements of these persons," the letter stated.

The declaration of the Velanai commander has sinister implications. If his personnel had nothing to do with the disappearance of Wimalaswaran and Mathivathanan, he would have had no hesitation in supplying basic information. The commanding officer on Punguduthivu had no difficulty in consulting log books and informing the SEP that the two men had been checked onto and off the island.

By baldly denying the existence of the road block, the Velanai commander is seeking to avoid any questioning of his officers or the examination of any logbooks. The police response demonstrates that they are more interested in covering up the activities of the security forces, than in carrying out any serious investigation into the disappearance of the two men. Simple inquiries with local villagers would confirm the existence of a navy road block on the day.

Neither did the police press the matter with the Punguduthivu naval commander, Vipula Hemantha Peiris, who in a statement to police acknowledged receiving a complaint about the disappearance of the two men. The HQI's letter to the magistrate stated Peiris "informed [the police] that even though investigations were made by him into this disappearance, it has not been possible to obtain any information in regard to the two disappeared persons."

The presiding magistrate refused to the contents of the letter and ordered the Velanai commanding officer to appear before the court on August 24. The case has now dragged for nearly three months as a result of the stalling tactics of the police and navy. The police have reported no independent steps in investigating the disappearances and have failed to follow up details uncovered by the SEP.

The security forces have been implicated in hundreds of disappearances, abductions and murders over the past year since the government restarted its communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Increasingly nervous at local and international criticism, the state apparatus is desperate to cover up the involvement of the military. Virtually no one has been charged in any of these cases.

According to a report released by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) last week, more than 1,100 abductions were

reported between January 2006 and June 2007 in the North and East as well as in the capital Colombo. HRW Asia director Brad Adams told the media: “The Sri Lankan government has apparently given its security forces a green light to use ‘dirty war’ tactics. Abuses by the LTTE are no excuse for the government’s campaign of killings, ‘disappearances’ and forced returns of the displaced.”

During a visit to Sri Lanka last week, UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, John Holmes commented to Reuters that the country was a very dangerous place for aid workers. He pointed out that 30 aid workers have been killed during the past 18 months—since President Mahinda Rajapakse won office. Other aid agencies put the figure at 34.

The government immediately attacked the HRW and Holmes for LTTE bias and “tarnishing the image of the government” and security forces. Chief government whip Jeyaraj Fernandopulle told the media that he believed Holmes had taken a bribe from the LTTE and was deliberately trying to harm Sri Lanka’s reputation. “We consider people who support terrorists also terrorists. So Holmes, who supports the LTTE is also a terrorist,” he declared.

The hysterical character of such denunciations simply confirms that the government has a great deal to hide. It has made no attempt to challenge the facts presented by the HRW or Holmes.

We again call on SEP supporters and WSWs readers to demand that Sri Lankan authorities conduct an urgent investigation to find Wimalaewaran and Mathivathanan and secure their safe release.

Letters can be sent to:

Gotabhaya Rajapakse,
Secretary of Ministry of Defence,
15/5 Baladaksha Mawatha,
Colombo 3, Sri Lanka
Fax: 009411 2541529
Email: secretary@defence.lk

N. G. PUNCHIHEWA Director of Complaints and Inquiries,
Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission,
No. 36, Kinsey Road, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka
Fax: 009411 2694924

Copies should be sent to the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Socialist Equality Party,
P.O. Box 1270,
Colombo, Sri Lanka.
Email: wswscmb@sltnet.lk

To send letters to the WSWs editorial board please use this online form.

The following is a selection of correspondence received:

The annual congress of the Ceylon Teachers Union held on July 27 in Colombo unanimously passed the following resolution:

“This congress of Ceylon Teachers Union strongly urges that Sri Lankan government must provide a full report into the disappearance of SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaewaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan in Kayts area of the Jaffna peninsula on last March 22.

“The military could be directly responsible for their disappearance following their entry onto the causeway linking Punguduthivu island and Kayts island. Checkpoints are maintained

at both ends by the navy and [the area is] regularly patrolled by the navy. Substantial evidence to this effect has been collected by the SEP and published on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“Although five months have passed since their disappearance, the government or Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission has not held a proper investigation yet. This congress holds the government responsible for the disappearance of Wimalaewaran and Mathivathanan and urges the government to secure their safe release.

“The government and its relevant authorities have also failed so far to hold a proper and serious investigation into the murder of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas who was killed at his own house in Mullipothana of eastern Trincomalee district on August 7 last year. There is credible evidence implicating the military, which spread false rumours in the area after the killing that Mariyadas was an LTTE member. The failure of the police to arrest or charge anyone for this crime even after nearly one year strongly vindicates that point.

“This congress condemns these disappearances and killing as political crimes carried out against these persons and also the SEP because of their opposition to war and all types of racist politics, and also their struggle to unite the working class on a socialist program.”

Dear Sir,

As a supporter of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party, it greatly saddens me to learn about the disappearance of Nadarajah Wimalaewaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan. It also horrifies me to learn that this takes place in the context of a dirty civil war, which has seen hundreds of Sri Lankans “disappeared” or outright murdered. While the only response we get from the officials is callous indifference, I want you to know that there are hundreds of comrades around the world who will not rest until we get justice in this matter. I urge you (or anyone in your ministry with scruples) to assist us in this effort immediately!

Sincerely,
KM
California, USA



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact