Thousands protest in Paris and Berlin against war in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
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Mass demonstrations took place Wednesday in both Germany and France to protest the murderous onslaught being carried out by the Sri Lankan army against the largely defenceless Tamil population in the North of the country. On both demonstrations, members of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) attempted to prevent supporters of the WSWS from distributing leaflets.

Berlin

On the day marking the 61st anniversary of the independence of Sri Lanka, around 8,000 Tamils marched through the centre of Berlin to protest against the continuing military onslaught by the Sri Lankan army against the Tamil population. Participants came from all age groups and included many families. Striking was the number of younger Tamils taking part, many of whom had been born and raised in Germany.

Buses and coaches brought the participants from all over Germany—from Hamburg in the north to Munich in the south. The march began at the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), the party of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and proceeded past the Indian embassy through the centre of the German capital.

Many demonstrators carried banners depicting the suffering of civilians, and in particular children. Some participants drew a direct parallel between the events in Sri Lanka and the recent murderous offensive launched by the Israeli army in Gaza. One banner read: "Gaza and Sri Lanka Vanni are both on the same planet." Another banner referred to the recent campaign by the Sri Lankan government to censor journalists and the media: "Genocide without witnesses."

The demonstration was limited almost entirely to Tamils, indicating that the organisers had circulated material for the demonstration inside the Tamil community, but had made no attempt to publicise the protest more widely.

Sintha is a young student studying in Düsseldorf. She told the WSWS most all the Tamils attending the demonstration, had relatives and friends in northern Sri Lanka who are in danger of immediate attack. "I have family members, including my grandmother and aunt as well as other relatives and friends, in Jaffna and Vanni," she said.

"Only the other day my friend reported that her grandmother and grandfather had been killed when a bomb hit their house," Sintha told us. "I am naturally worried about my own relatives. There has to be an immediate ceasefire, otherwise the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of Tamils are at stake.

"I was born here and grew up in Germany, like many other Tamils here today. But for our mothers and fathers who were born and have their roots in Sri Lanka, the situation is especially stressful. An average of 50 people are dying on a daily basis with many more wounded. If the fighting does not stop, then the entire Tamil population is at risk."

Sintha criticised the fact that German journalists and other media sources have been prevented by the Sri Lankan government from reporting on the war. She noted that the aim of the demonstration was to create publicity for the plight of Tamils and put pressure on European governments, including the German government.

At the same time, she was critical of European governments for failing to clearly condemn the offensive launched by the Sri Lankan army. "The European Union has failed to speak out against what is happening, and at the same time European governments supply weapons to the Sri Lankan army. They are complicit in the campaign waged by the Sri Lankan government against the Tamils."

Ramesh, 31, runs a pizzeria in the German city of Neuss. "I shut my restaurant today," he said. "It is more important to be here." He said he was demonstrating in particular to protest against the plight of the Tamils. "Increasing numbers of innocent people are being killed. People have no means of fleeing the area and are defenceless against the rounds and ammunition fired by the military." Ramesh has relatives in the region where intense fighting is taking place and is extremely concerned because he has had no news from them.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit , PSG) distributed leaflets titled "A socialist perspective to end the war in Sri Lanka—Troops out of northern and eastern Sri Lanka."

The leaflet noted: "The war crimes being committed by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse are an expression of the increasing turn to brutal methods by the imperialist powers and their national bourgeois surrogates in order to secure their geopolitical interests, as is seen in Afghanistan, Iraq and Gaza."

Although Western governments have repeatedly made clear their support for the Sri Lankan army, the perspective of the LTTE continues to concentrate on putting pressure on the self-same governments. The leaflet states: "[The LTTE's] demand for a capitalist state let in the North and East of Sri Lanka to fulfil the needs of sections of the Tamil elite was always based on the mediation of one or other of the major powers....

"The allies of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka and in the Diaspora in the imperialist countries are the working class. It is the only social

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force with the power and whose class interests lie in ending the war, overthrowing the Sri Lankan bourgeois state, and ensuring the democratic rights of the Tamil population, as part of the struggle against the imperialist world order."

The leaflet then closes with the words: "In Sri Lanka, the ICFI's section, the Socialist Equality Party, is the only party fighting for the unification of working people regardless of their ethnic origin and demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of armed forces from the North and East. The SEP advances the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia, the only means for putting an end to the communal, ethnic and caste politics that have plagued the whole region for over half a century."

The leaflet was warmly received by those participating in the demonstration and many of those taking part expressed their support for the stance taken by the SEP in Sri Lanka. Organisers of the protest, however, reacted very differently. They had distributed their own leaflet, which stressed the necessity of putting pressure on European governments. A leaflet distributed by the "Tamil Coordination Committees," an exile organisation of the LTTE, stated: "The German government together with the European Union must use economic and diplomatic measures to put pressure on the Sri Lankan government to call an immediate ceasefire."

Based on their own perspective, organisers of the demonstration were not prepared to tolerate the distribution of the SEP leaflet. A number of stewards on the demonstration intervened to prevent SEP members from distributing their material. "What you write is opposed to us. We will not allow that," they said, and added, "Why don't you distribute your leaflets at a Sinhala demonstration!"

Representatives of the LTTE, sought to reduce any criticism of their own orientation to the great powers to support for the war and the county's government. In so doing, they encourage nationalism and chauvinism by equating the Sinhala masses with the country's political elite.

When a number of demonstrators sought to defend the right of the SEP to distribute their leaflet, the stewards called the police. The SEP supporters were able to clarify with the police that they had the right—at least on the perimeter of the demonstration—to spread their material. However, when the police left stewards moved in once again to tear leaflets out of the hands of those distributing them, while other LTTE members sought to ensure that their aggression was shielded from the demonstration as a whole. The intervention by the stewards demonstrated the political bankruptcy of the LTTE, which is unable to respond to political criticism other than with intimidation and violence.

Paris

A massive rally in the Champs de Mars, against the Sri Lankan government's military offensive and atrocities in the North of the island, also took place on Wednesday in front of the Eiffel Tower. It had been called by various Tamil nationalist organisations that support the LTTE. The demonstration followed one the previous Wednesday in Paris, when over 50,000 had participated. There were no delegations of left organisations present and they did not appear to have been invited.

Tamils of all ages were there, including many women and girls, with placards accusing the Rajapakse regime of genocide and expressing horror and anger at the killings. New participants came in waves to join the demonstration after 3 p.m.—including workers finishing their jobs at restaurant and hotels, as well as students.

Banners showed victims of the violence, including 17 members of a group working in northern Sri Lanka to oppose famine. The group are shown lying by the roadside after being killed by the Sri Lankan Army. The banner read: "We demand justice from the French state! Should they be forgotten just because they are Tamils?"

Protest organisers handed out hundreds of placards with photos of President Nicolas Sarkozy, requesting that he come to the aid of the Tamil people. There were also many portraits of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and US President Barack Obama, with similar pleas.

A letter addressed to Sarkozy, by the Federation of Former Pupils of Sri Lankan Colleges, spoke to the representative of French imperialism in the most obsequious terms: "We know you for your tireless efforts to create a just peace in the Middle East. Your dynamism and firm intent to find peaceful solutions for world conflicts encourage us to think that you can intervene with the Sri Lankan authorities to end this bloody conflict."

Speakers at the rally put faith in Foreign Affairs Minister Bernard Kouchner to find a diplomatic solution, and called for support for the LTTE leadership.

WSWS supporters distributed 7,500 copies of "A socialist perspective to end the war in Sri Lanka"—Troops out of northern and eastern Sri Lanka" in both Tamil and French. Demonstrators expressed their sympathy with the leaflet and asked to distribute it to others, and requested more copies to give their French workmates. The WSWS team was surrounded by people wanting copies of the leaflet and to discuss it, particularly on the issue of the disastrous failure of the project to set up a separate Tamil state let.

LTTE stewards then tried to prevent the WSWS team from distributing the leaflets. Due to the high level of interest showed by demonstrators in the WSWS material, however, it was impossible for the LTTE stewards to impose this censorship.

WSWS supporters also sought to speak at the final rally, but were prevented on the supposed grounds that the leaflets they were handing out defamed the LTTE struggle. The organisers of the demonstration and rally were quite prepared, however, to allow municipality mayors from the Communist and Socialist parties to speak.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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