

Large demonstration in India against Sri Lankan war

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Around 20,000 people took part in an eight-hour funeral march in the southern Indian city of Chennai on Saturday for K. Muthukumar—a young Tamil who set himself alight in front of the city's central government office complex last Thursday in protest against the communal war in neighbouring Sri Lanka.

The demonstration was part of a growing protest movement in India and other countries against the Sri Lankan government's war on the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At least 200,000 civilians are trapped and hundreds have been killed as government troops have indiscriminately shelled and bombed the remaining LTTE-held territory in the north of the island.

The funeral procession involved a large number of students and young people as well as representatives of various Tamil Nadu-based political parties and organisations. The demonstration was also joined by Sri Lankan Tamils, many of whom live in squalid refugee camps in the southern India state.

In an effort to suppress further protests, the Tamil Nadu government headed by the Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (DMK) announced on Saturday that colleges and student hostels throughout the state would be closed until further notice. When the news reached demonstrating students, they stopped the vehicle carrying Muthukumar's body and insisted he not be cremated until his aims were met.

Angry exchanges took place between students and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) and

Marumalarchi Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (MDMK) politicians who insisted that the march proceed. According to one account, VCK members attacked the students and took control of the vehicles. The cremation finally took place late on Saturday night with the agreement of the students "after a lot of pacification".

Protests have also taken place against Indian military assistance for the Sri Lankan war. The Indian government has been involved in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, New Delhi has backed the war against the LTTE, concerned that its separatist demands may encourage similar movements in India and also that regional rivals, particularly Pakistan, were using military aid to boost their influence in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the Indian government is under pressure from the DMK, which is part of the national ruling coalition, to respond to the humanitarian disaster in northern Sri Lanka.

On January 27, police arrested a group of students in front of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly as they attempted to protest against military aid to Sri Lanka. They were highlighting a claim that appeared in a Tamil Nadu newspaper that the Indian government was in the process of exporting battle tanks to Sri Lanka. While the claim is yet to be proven, the Indian military has provided training, intelligence, radar and other forms of military assistance.

On Saturday, about 1,000 people protested outside the Tanjore Air Force base in southern Tamil Nadu, alleging that it had been used to transfer lethal and non-lethal weaponry to the Palali air-force base in northern Sri Lanka.

An umbrella organisation known as the Sri Lankan Tamil Protection movement has called for a general strike throughout Tamil Nadu on Wednesday to urge the Indian government to demand a ceasefire in Sri Lanka. The state government declared on Sunday that the strike was illegal, but support is growing. The Tamil Nadu Government Employees Union has announced that it will take part in the strike.

Concerned to contain political opposition in Tamil Nadu, the Indian government dispatched External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee last week to Colombo for talks. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse assured Mukherjee that civilian casualties would be minimised. Last Thursday he issued a 48-hour ultimatum to the LTTE to "release" civilians held within its territory and guaranteed their "safe passage".

In Tamil Nadu, the DMK and the opposition All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (AIADMK) immediately welcomed these worthless assurances. Last week the Sri Lankan military bombarded a "safe zone" established by the International Committee of the Red Cross, killing an estimated 20 people.

Rajapakse's claims that the LTTE is holding civilians as "human shields" against their will are just as bogus. Those trapped in the fighting are not only aware of the physical dangers they face attempting to cross the frontlines, but also that they will be incarcerated in virtual concentration camps if they do reach government-held territory.

Both the DMK and AIADMK have staged a series of stunts in recent months to protest against the war in Sri Lanka. Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi convened an all-party meeting last year that passed a resolution declaring that Tamil Nadu MPs in the national parliament would resign on masse if the Indian government did not stop the war in two weeks. They quickly backed away after New Delhi issued a mild diplomatic note to the Sri Lankan government.

Other parties in Tamil Nadu such as the VCK, MDMK, Pattali Makkal Kachchi (PMK) and Tamil

National Movement (TNM) support the LTTE and its demand for a separate capitalist statelet of "Eelam" in the north and east of Sri Lanka. At a recent conference, VCK president Thol. Thirumavalavan declared that Tamils in Sri Lanka had no other alternative but to demand a separate nation because their attempts to reach a negotiated solution to end anti-Tamil discrimination had failed.

The collapse of the LTTE, however, flows from its bankrupt political perspective, and not simply military defeat. Its calls for a separate Tamil state reflected the interests of layers of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not workers and farmers, and were based on appealing to the major international powers for support. The LTTE has proven incapable of making any appeal to the working class as a whole in Sri Lanka and throughout the region. In fact, its denunciations of the Sinhalese people in general and vicious attacks on Sinhalese civilians have played directly into the hands of Sinhala supremacists in Colombo.

Workers, students and young people need to turn a new perspective. In the current provincial elections in Sri Lanka, the Socialist Equality Party is campaigning against all forms of communalism and nationalism and seeking to unite working people around a socialist program to fight for their common class interests. It is the only party that has consistently opposed the war and demanded the immediate withdrawal of Sri Lankan security forces from the North and East of the island. Its call for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia, has broad significance for the working class throughout the region where communal, ethnic and caste politics have produced one disaster after another for over half a century.



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