SEP campaigns in a Sri Lankan fishing village

Our correspondents
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As part of its campaign for the February 14 provincial elections in Sri Lanka, a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team visited Udappu, an isolated fishing village in the Puttalam district of Northwestern province. The SEP is standing two lists, each of 19 candidates, one for Puttalam district and the other for Nuwara Eliya district in Central Province.

The party is well known in Udappu as a result of its principled opposition to the government's war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the SEP's campaigns against the victimisation of the island's Tamil minority. The population of the village is about 15,000—most are Tamils descended from poor immigrants from India.

To reach Udappu, one has to take a disintegrating 4-kilometre road from the Colombo-Puttalam main road at Battuluoya, north of Chilaw. On both sides of the road are deserted fields and prawn farms where village women can be seen working. The only transport is a private passenger bus service that runs between Chilaw and Udappu every two hours.

Udappu is a compact village with eight sections, including Andimunai, Selvapuram and six wards. Most fishermen are very poor. Their homes are huts with wooden walls and thatched roofs. During our visit, several huts were leaning badly and about to collapse. They have no sanitary facilities or water supply. Villagers have to buy drinking water brought by a tractor for five rupees per 15 litres. Some people walk long distances to collect water from a well in buckets or pots. But the available well water is salty.

While Udappu is nowhere near the frontlines of the civil war, the conflict nevertheless reaches into every aspect of life. As Tamils, the fishermen are automatically treated by the security forces as supporters of the LTTE and suspected of smuggling. Heavy restrictions have been placed on their fishing activities, leading to a loss of income. Locals are subject to constant harassment by police and military personnel who conduct frequent sweeps through the village. Over the past year, several people have been murdered or abducted—in all likelihood by military-sponsored death squads that have killed or "disappeared" hundreds throughout the island.

Some 4,000 families depend on fishing for their income. The poorer fishermen use rafts, known as *teppam* made from wooden logs or fibreglass. A small navy camp has been established in Udappu as a base for patrolling. Fishermen are banned from coming close to navy vessels and must return from sea by 9 p.m. A pass system has been recently imposed on boat owners. They have to obtain their passes from a navy camp at Kalpitiya, about 70 kilometres further north. If they go to sea without a pass, they face physical abuse.

Selva 53, a fisherman, said: "The president says war is over. How can it come to an end as long as the cause of the war is there, as it is? I don't think that peace will prevail in this country. The situation may become worse. After this victory, the communally-minded elements have taken the upper hand. Only the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people can get rid of the present political parties and bring prosperity and peace."

Selva's son-in-law was abducted last March by an armed group in a white van—the trademark of the death squads—but somehow managed to escape. Fearing for his life, he fled to India. Selva continued: "Recently some fishermen who came near the navy camp in their boats were detained, ordered to kneel for hours and all of them were soaked in water a number of times. Limitations have been imposed on the fishing areas. We can't carry out our fishing activities as normal."

Letchumanan, another fisherman, compared the situation in the war-torn North and East with Udappu. "What a lot of trouble we face with the presence of a small number of navy personnel in a normal area like this. What must it be like for those people, who live in a war zone with a large number of armed troops waging a war?"

One woman was feeding her one-year-old son inside her thatched hut when we spoke to her. She began crying as she explained: "Last September two persons came, knocked on our door and called for my husband. They were in trousers and jackets and asked about someone else's house. I was also standing there with my husband. They asked me for matches. As I went inside, they started shooting. I turned round and saw my husband lying dead on the ground. They rushed off toward a checkpoint on their motorbike.

"The police came and took my husband to the hospital for a post-mortem. The police took no action. Nothing happened after that. Now my son and I have to go house-to-house to find something to eat. There is no one to help us. It was with the knowledge of the

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police and security forces that my husband was killed," she said.

The villagers were generally scornful and angry about the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), whose candidates and supporters have again appeared in the village making a new round of empty promises to get votes.

A UPFA candidate, Riyas, issued a leaflet claiming that President Mahinda Rajapakse was carrying out "development programs" while waging the "war against terrorism." L.M. Aupkhan, the main UNP candidate for Puttalam, claimed as a council member to have brought education, transport, electricity, health and self employment facilities to the area.

But the villagers said they had received nothing. They explained that they were seeing these politicians for the first time since local government elections three years ago. Their living standards had deteriorated since Rajapakse restarted the communal war in 2006.

V. Karunanithi, a local fisherman and SEP candidate, explained what day-to-day life was like for Udappu's fishing families. "Because of lack of time and economic burdens our families cook only one meal—rice and one or two curries—per day [that serves] for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We rarely have different meals. We don't cook the expensive fish we catch. We sell those and buy cheap fish for our own use. Usually we eat fish with one or two cheap vegetables.

"We go fishing in the very early hours—at about 3 or 4 a.m. When we reach the shore at about 9 a.m., our wives are there to help us. They help in removing the fish and rubbish from the net. And again we have to disentangle the net. Some days we earn some money and some days nothing. Only on Friday do we have a day off.

"Many people from this village, mostly the women, never travel to other areas. Sometimes they travel to the East with their husbands when they go to fish there. As they sacrifice their whole life to the sea, they never enjoy a family trip or a picnic."

Another fisherman said: "I don't have a boat, so I work for a number of boat owners. Normally during the fishing season I used to get 250 to 500 rupees [$US2.15-$4.38] per day. You just imagine how little you can do with this money when you compare it with the price of basic food items. Even when we go to sea we have to carry our national identity cards, in addition to the fishing pass. But to get a pass, we have to spend days without earning any money."

Referring to the present humanitarian crisis produced by the war, he said: "Tamil people in the Wanni have fallen into the fire from the pan. Earlier the UNP and its leader Ranil Wickremasinghe spoke about peace. But now they are clearly supporting the war."

During the south-western monsoon period, Udappu fishermen used to cross the island to the east coast, especially to Trincomalee, to fish. They would stay there for about six months in temporary thatched huts. As the war intensified, they faced growing restrictions and difficulties in the East. Now they are not allowed to sail more than five miles off shore. If they pass that limit, they could be shot at by the navy.

A young fisherman explained the problems. "To go to Trincomalee we need 30,000 or 40,000 rupees [$US263-$350]. We have to load all the fishing gear and goods for meals on the lorry. If we work for a boat owner, we have to pay him an advance of 20,000 rupees. After paying the loans we give our family the balance before leaving again. They have to manage on that money for six months."

Education and health facilities in Udappu are limited—three schools and a hospital developed by NGOs. Many students drop out of school after, or even before, completing their ordinary levels due to lack of money.

One father explained: "Students have to bring water from home as the school has no water supply. We pay 450 rupees per year for school fees. As the government doesn't pay for volunteer teachers, the parents have to collect the money and pay them. The hospital has only one doctor. We took a person who had an accident while fishing to the hospital. The doctor was not there. The fisherman died on the way to Chilaw hospital."

The SEP team campaigned in Udappu for two days then held an outdoor meeting on February 6. About 50 people gathered around the speakers while several hundred more stood listening at a distance, concerned about being too closely identified with the SEP's meeting. W.A. Sunil, V. Karunanithi, Kapila Fernando, A. Shantha Kumar—all SEP candidates—addressed the crowd. Sinhala speakers were translated into Tamil.

As Karunanithi was speaking, one man called out in support for having the courage to mention the large number of killings and abductions that had taken place over the past year. The speeches provoked considerable discussion, with a number of people commenting that this was the only party that told the truth about the war and the conditions they faced.

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