

Australian vigil denounces Sri Lankan government atrocities

Our correspondents
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About 250 people, mainly from the Tamil community, joined a candlelight vigil at Parramatta, in western Sydney, last night to protest against the atrocities being committed by the Sri Lankan military in the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the northern Wanni region.

Many of those participating—who included entire families, as well as students and young workers—have relatives who have perished or remain trapped in the small area still under LTTE control, which is under heavy, indiscriminate shelling by the military.

Several people who spoke to the WWSW told of civilian relatives, including children, who had been killed or maimed by the Sri Lankan armed forces. They said that, contrary to the government's propaganda, more than 2,000 civilians had been killed in the onslaught and that a quarter of a million people were still caught in the war zone.

Everyone we spoke to angrily denied the government's claims that the LTTE was using civilians as "human shields". They insisted that their relatives refused to leave the LTTE-held enclave because they feared reprisals and detention at the hands of the government and the security forces, who are incarcerating all war refugees in large "welfare villages".

WWSW and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters distributed copies of recent articles from the WWSW exposing the humanitarian catastrophe and war crimes being committed by the regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse, and highlighting the campaign waged by the

SEP in Sri Lanka to demand the immediate withdrawal of troops from the north and east.

The articles also explained the political dead-end of the LTTE's perspective of an armed struggle to pressure the major international powers to support a separate Tamil state, and the necessity for a socialist perspective to unify the struggles of the Sri Lankan masses—Tamil and Sinhala alike—against the Colombo ruling elite.

Supporters of the LTTE stepped in to instruct people not to take the WWSW leaflets and even collected leaflets from those who had begun to read them. This anti-democratic response revealed a real fear of opening up a discussion about the SEP's socialist alternative to the divisive communalism of both the Sinhala establishment and the LTTE itself.

Numbers of people simply ignored the ban and animated debates began with SEP supporters about the contents of the WWSW leaflets. In the end, the organisers of the vigil asked one of the SEP team to address the rally.

The Tamil organisation speakers at the rally appealed for the Sri Lankan government to agree to an immediate ceasefire and ensure the safe passage of civilian refugees. They urged the major powers, particularly India, the primary regional power, to intervene to place pressure on the Rajapakse regime.

The main English-language speaker described in some detail the efforts of the Tamil organisations to petition and lobby the Indian government, as well as the Australian government and local politicians. He called on all those present to join these efforts, and to

demand, during the next federal election campaign, that "politicians do something".

WSWS correspondent Mike Head began by thanking the audience for the invitation to speak, and expressed sympathy and solidarity with all those whose families were being killed, maimed and incarcerated by the Sri Lankan government.

Head denounced the war crimes of the Rajapakse regime and condemned all the governments, including those of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, that are supporting the war.

The speaker explained the necessity for a unified struggle of Tamil and Sinhala workers against the Rajapakse government. He emphasised that the victims of the war were not confined to Tamils and warned that any victory by the army would see the same militarist methods turned against the working class as a whole as the global economic crisis produced rising social discontent.

As well covering up the civilian death toll in the north, the Sri Lankan government was trying to hide the death toll among the soldiers, who predominantly came from the poorest layers of society. At least 3,000 had died in the offensives ordered by the government, affecting families across Sri Lanka.

The SEP speaker opposed the separatist program of the LTTE, which served to divide the working class. He explained that the emergence of the LTTE and the Sinhala chauvinist *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), arose out of the great betrayal of the former Trotskyist party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), in joining the Bandaranaike coalition government in 1964.

Following independence in 1948, the LSSP had opposed all forms of official discrimination against Tamils. But by the early 1960s the party had capitulated to the Sinhala-first platform of Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), abandoning the essential fight for a socialist perspective to unify the working class against the ruling establishment.

Head pointed out the futility of the LTTE's perspective of trying to convince the imperialist powers to reverse their backing for the current SLFP-led government's bid to wipe out the LTTE. Instead of the illusory hope of lobbying governments, the way forward lay in uniting workers in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally on a class basis against the capitalist system that was ultimately responsible for the carnage on the island.

The speaker concluded by urging people to read the daily coverage and analysis provided by the WSWS, which is also available in Tamil and Sinhalese.

Interviewed by the WSWS before the rally, Anu Prakash said the situation in the Wannu region was a "war without witnesses" because the Sri Lankan government had barred access to the international media and aid organisations.

"My husband's cousins are in the conflict zone, with two young children. My impression is that they would not agree to come out because of their political views—they support self-determination for Tamils. The government is screening all the people coming out for defiant or alternative political views. The government has clearly said: 'You are either with us or against us.' So if you are not with the government, you are a terrorist. They are lumping the LTTE and civilians together."

Asked about the LTTE's perspective of trying to pressure other governments, which are all basically supporting Rajapakse, she said: "That's a good question. We are very disappointed about India's role in the war... We were very hopeful that India would change its stance. Right now they are supporting the Sri Lankan government's stand."



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