

Britain: Mass demonstrations protest Sri Lankan government's civil war

Robert Stevens
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More than 100,000 people took part in a demonstration Saturday in London, demanding the Sri Lankan government end its murderous war against the Tamil population and implement an immediate ceasefire.

The mobilisation was part of a series of protests held in the capital over the last week, involving mainly Tamil refugees, including a blockade of Parliament and hunger strikes. Organisations supporting the protests include Students Against Genocide of Tamils (SAGT) and the British Tamil Forum.

The London protests began on April 6. Several thousand protesters gathered for an impromptu demonstration outside Parliament, with the slogans “stop the genocide” and “stop the war” and blocking traffic through Westminster Bridge.

The Metropolitan Police declared the protest illegal and cordoned it off. One demonstrator jumped into the River Thames and was rescued by emergency services. That evening, thousands of people, including families with young children, staged an overnight sit-in outside Parliament.

The following morning, at 6.30 a.m., police announced that the protest would be moved to Parliament Square. Many demonstrators were dragged away by their arms and legs, and police staged several baton charges on those attempting to move to the Square.

A number of demonstrators received serious injuries as a result of the police attacks. Kavitha Sathiyamoorthy, an 18-year-old protester, told the *Guardian* newspaper that the police had charged the demonstration, causing her to fall into the crowd.

“I ended up having two protesters on top of me,

choking me. Therefore I couldn't breathe. A few seconds after that, I was getting dragged by the police. I was getting dragged by my ankle across the floor. My back was getting scraped and my top had lifted up. They didn't take any account of that. Soon after that two police officer held my arms behind my sides on both sides and my arm was bent behind my back, really violently”.

She added that “after a while I just fainted to the floor,” and that the police then called an ambulance and told her to go to hospital. Sathiyamoorthy said that she refused to do so and that she intended to remain on the demonstration.

Another woman injured by police was a medical student, Inthu Rubarajah. She said that the protest was peaceful until “riot police came at us.”

“I was physically manhandled,” she continued. “One male officer flung me across the floor. I fell to the floor. And it has not just happened to me, it's happened to so many other people here.” She also stated that one protester had “had a heart attack, another person had a broken spine, one child suffered serious injuries and was taken to hospital.”

The BBC confirmed that several demonstrators were taken away on stretchers for medical aid. By Tuesday evening, police had made six arrests, including two protesters who were detained for carrying an LTTE flag. Under Britain's draconian anti-terror laws, the LTTE is a proscribed organisation.

The weeklong actions, culminating in Saturday's mass protest, underscore the justified outrage, in the 250,000-strong Tamil population residing in the UK, at the Sri Lankan government's civil war.

Last week, the Sri Lankan military announced that it had captured Puthukkudiyiruppu, the last town controlled by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil

Eelam (LTTE). An estimated 100,000 civilians are trapped in the government-declared “no-fire zone.” Aid agencies report that dozens are dying daily in the pocket, which measures only 20 square kilometres, as a result of shelling and severe shortages of food, shelter and medicine.

Demonstrators spoke of how they had lost parents, brothers, sisters and other family members as a result of the military action, and their fears for those still trapped.

Earlier in the week, two of the student protesters, Sivatharsan Sivakumaraval and Prarameswaran Subramaniam, began a hunger strike to highlight the Sri Lankan military’s atrocities.

Over the weekend, it was reported that the two had agreed to drink water, after being promised that Sivakumaraval may be able to participate in forthcoming talks on the Sri Lankan conflict.

The deal was negotiated by opposition Liberal Democrat party MP Simon Hughes, who said he would try to arrange for a delegation of protesters to visit the United Nations. Also set to be involved in the talks is Des Browne, former defence secretary and the prime minister’s special envoy to Sri Lanka.

Pressure on the British government to intervene and help achieve a negotiated settlement with the Sri Lankan government is a major objective of the British Tamil Forum.

Together with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Tamils, it recently held a conference in London to address “the role that international actors” need to play in achieving a settlement that was addressed by Browne and former Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer—both of whom played a leading role in endorsing the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Still, the British Tamil Forum, which demands a two-state solution in Sri Lanka, continues to propagate the myth that the imperialist powers in general—and Britain, as the former colonial power in Sri Lanka, in particular—are the means by which “peace with justice and dignity” can be achieved.

For his part, Browne has issued cursory statements in support of a ceasefire and expressing concern at the deteriorating humanitarian situation in northern Sri Lanka. However, at the same time, it was reported at the weekend that the British government had prevented a humanitarian aid shipment by a “Mercy Mission”

vessel to the north from leaving British shores.

The ship, which was to carry more than 2,000 metric tonnes of food and medical aid raised by various charities, was prevented from sailing after objections by the Sri Lankan government.



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