

Sri Lankan government stalls on release of Tamil detainees

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The Sri Lankan government continues to detain nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians despite growing anger inside the country, particularly among the Tamil minority. President Mahinda Rajapakse has ignored calls by international human rights agencies for the release of the detainees, who were incarcerated in the final stages of the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

According to a recent UN report, as of July 17 there were 281,621 people in 30 detention camps, guarded by the military, in the Vavuniya, Mannar, Jaffna and Trincomalee districts. About 160,000 people are being held in the Manik Farm camps near Vavuniya.

The military had planned to hold the detainees for up to three years. However, amid international criticism, President Rajapakse promised to resettle everyone by the end of this year. Now that pledge is being shelved as the government invents new pretexts to delay resettlement—the need to de-mine northern areas and to single out alleged “LTTE cadres”.

Addressing a press conference in Colombo on July 30, the new army commander in charge of camps, Major General Daya Ratnayake, claimed that several thousand LTTE members still remained in the camps. He said that once the security forces had finished the screening process, the number of detained LTTE members could rise from the present 9,796 to 20,000. To heighten fears of renewed LTTE activity, Ratnayake declared that there were former LTTE members trained as suicide bombers in the camps.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, struck a similar note in an interview with the *Sunday Island* last weekend, saying there had been attempts to rescue hardcore LTTE fighters from the camps. Without offering any

evidence, Rajapakse claimed this could be part of a plan to revive the LTTE, which was crushed by the army in mid-May. He accused critics of the camps of campaigning to free LTTE members before they could be identified.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s comments are aimed at branding anyone opposing the government’s gross abuse of democratic rights as providing aid to “LTTE terrorists”. His remarks underscore that the real purpose of the “welfare villages” is not to provide assistance to refugees but to hold hundreds of thousands of civilians indefinitely while the army consolidates its occupation of previous LTTE-held territory. Despite their denials, the government and the military regard all Tamils as the enemy.

The incarceration of Tamil civilians makes a mockery of the government’s claims to have “liberated” them from the LTTE. Inside the internment centres, the security forces have established a regime of harassment and intimidation. Young people are being interrogated and dragged away on a daily basis without their relatives being told. Thousands of “LTTE suspects” are being held without charge or legal representation.

A particularly sinister aspect of Gotabhaya’s interview was his claim that many people had “escaped” from the camps over the previous two months. The detention camps are surrounded by barbed wire and heavily guarded by soldiers. Rather than “escaping,” it is far more likely that detainees are being “disappeared”. Over the past three years, pro-government death squads, operating with the complicity of the military, have been responsible for hundreds of murders and “disappearances”.

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a report on July 28 demanding the Sri Lankan government “immediately release the more than

280,000 internally displaced Tamil civilians held in detention camps”. HRW’s Asia director Brad Adams commented: “Keeping several hundred thousand civilians who had been caught in the middle of a war penned in these camps is outrageous... Haven’t they been through enough? They deserve their freedom, like all other Sri Lankans.”

The report noted that the government had “confined virtually all civilians displaced by the fighting ... in detention camps,” releasing “only a small number of camp residents, mainly the elderly”. The detainees are “allowed to leave [the camps] only for emergency medical care, and then frequently only with military escort”.

In an effort to stifle criticism, the Rajapakse government has barred all media from the camps. According to HRW, humanitarian workers are forced to sign a statement promising not to disclose information about the conditions in the camps without government permission. Those who refuse to comply face expulsion and the non-renewal of their visas.

HRW also accuses the government of prohibiting humanitarian workers from talking to internees about the fighting in the final months of the war. The refugees are eyewitnesses to the war crimes carried out by the army, which killed thousands of civilians in indiscriminate artillery barrages and air attacks.

Describing the conditions in the camp, one refugee, Premkumar, told HRW: “The way I see it, we are not internally displaced persons, we are internally displaced prisoners... We used to be in a prison controlled by [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran. Now we are in a prison controlled by the government.” He, his wife and three-year-old daughter have been held since mid-May.

HRW described the regime inside the detention centres. In the Kalimoddai and Sirukandal camps in the north-western Mannar district, inmates are forced to stand out in the sun twice each day to “register”. If they are late or fail to turn up, they are forced to carry out manual labour.

The report explained that thousands had been forcibly removed from the camps and transferred to the prisons for LTTE fighters or to Colombo for “further interrogation”. In many cases, “the authorities have failed to inform relatives remaining in the camps about the fate and whereabouts of those removed, raising concerns of possible ill-treatment or enforced

disappearance”.

Because of the government’s strict controls, little information has filtered out about the conditions inside the detention centres. Most camps are overcrowded, with some holding twice the number recommended by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The UN has noted that a shortage of latrines and a lack of reliable access to clean water were causing hygiene problems. Health officials recorded more than 8,000 cases of diarrhoea and hundreds of cases of hepatitis, dysentery and chickenpox in June alone.

International criticism of the Sri Lankan government’s detention of hundreds of thousands of civilians has largely died away. China, India, Russia and other countries blocked a motion in the UN Human Rights Council in May calling for an inquiry into war crimes in Sri Lanka and for greater access to the detention camps. While the EU and the US have made limited criticisms, their motive was primarily to boost their influence over the Colombo government. This month the US and European powers ended their stalling of a \$US2.6 billion IMF loan and allowed its approval.



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