

Sri Lanka: Detention of Tamil civilians to continue indefinitely

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Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse reiterated on Monday that up to 300,000 Tamil civilians who fled the fighting in the final days of the country's protracted civil war will remain incarcerated indefinitely. Their detention in squalid camps near Vavuniya and Jaffna as de facto prisoners of war is a flagrant abuse of democratic rights.

It is now three months since the army overran the last stronghold of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in northern Sri Lanka. Thousands of civilians were killed in the final battles as the military indiscriminately bombarded the LTTE's positions with artillery and from the air. Many of those who survived were injured and suffering from malnutrition and dehydration. They were herded into "welfare villages" surrounded by barbed wire and heavily armed troops.

Amid widespread international criticism, the government initially promised to resettle 80 percent of the detainees within 180 days. However, that pledge was quickly dropped after Sri Lanka with the backing of Russia and China blocked a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council that called for greater access to the detention camps.

The arbitrary detention of hundreds of thousands of Tamils, including the elderly and the very young, underscores the communal character of the war. For all the official propaganda about "liberating" Tamil civilians, the latest comments by Defence Secretary Rajapakse in the *Island* on Monday make clear that the government and the military regard all Tamils as the enemy—members of the "terrorist Tigers".

Rajapakse insisted that the freeing of detainees would only lead to the renewal of LTTE attacks. "LTTE terrorists masquerading as civilians, now taking refuge among the displaced, could resume attacks if the

government gave in to internal and external pressure and released them," he declared. "[T]here were a lot of explosives, arms and ammunition buried in the Vanni, particularly in the eastern part. Had they [LTTE fighters] been given an opportunity to lay their hands on them, they would resume attacks."

In other words, on the pretext of preventing "terrorist" attacks, the government has imprisoned hundreds of thousands of civilians indefinitely without charge or trial. Inside the detention centres, hundreds of young people have been questioned by security personnel then sent to unknown prisons for further interrogation and possibly torture. In many cases, their relatives have been given no information about their whereabouts.

The newly appointed Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sarath Fonseka, also insisted that none of the detainees be released. Speaking on Monday, he declared the camps were essential "to ensure security in the entire region liberated from the control of the terrorists for the people to live without fear and suspicion."

In fact, few civilians are left in much of the "liberated" region. Large swathes of former LTTE territory have been depopulated and transformed into army garrisons in preparation for permanent military occupation. Despite the end of fighting, Fonseka has already announced the recruitment of another 100,000 soldiers and plans for the establishment of new army camps in towns captured from the LTTE.

Underscoring his communal outlook, Fonseka continued: "[T]hey [Tamil civilians] were living under the law of terrorists for three decades, they know little about the civil life, civil law and civil administration". He stressed that the detainees had to be "rehabilitated to return to the normal life." "Rehabilitation" will

mean a protracted period of intimidation and indoctrination.

The government and the military have placed severe restrictions on access to the detention camps. The media is banned and aid organisations are compelled to give an undertaking not to reveal details of the centres. Visits by relatives are screened and monitored.

Despite the heavy censorship it is impossible to completely black out news of the worsening conditions inside the camps. Sudden torrential rains since August 14 have made life in the centres even more intolerable. The *Sunday Times* reported last weekend that more than 100,000 refugees are without proper shelters after flooding. Worst affected is that Manik Farm complex near Vavuniya that houses more than 160,000 people.

The UN news agency IRIN reported that some 37,000 detainees have been badly affected. Some 1,925 shelters have been damaged or destroyed and about 100 toilets have flooded, contaminating water supplies. "All the toilets are flooded. Human excrement is floating everywhere," one detainee told IRIN. "From an epidemiological point of view, this is a public health disaster waiting to happen," an international medical officer said.

The delivery of goods has virtually halted as travel on the flooded roads is almost impossible. Dry food rations are often wet when they are handed out. People have been forced to depend on cooked meals distributed by the government or aid agencies as it is difficult to find any dry firewood for cooking during the rainy season.

The rain has caused numerous difficulties for people living in makeshift tents made from plastic sheeting. According to the Associated Press, only about 1,000 families have been relocated to other areas of the camp. The rest have been left to fend for themselves as best they can. Movement within the camp is tightly restricted by security personnel.

The government claimed that the floods were receding and the situation was under control. However, Asia director of the US-based Human Rights Watch, Brad Adams, declared on Tuesday: "The government has detained people in these camps and is threatening their health and even their lives by keeping them there during the rainy season floods."

In a transparent attempt to evade responsibility, Rehabilitation Minister Rishard Bathiudeen accused the

United Nations of failing to construct a drainage system and other flood preventive measures. His statement only reveals the government's utter indifference to the plight of the incarcerated Tamil civilians. UN officials rejected the allegation.

Security has reportedly been boosted within and around the camps to suppress any unrest. According to Human Rights Watch, at least two protests took place in late July inside the Manik Farm camp resulting in even tougher internal security measures.

The flooding has compounded the already appalling conditions. The camps are badly overcrowded. For instance, two sections of the Manik Farm complex, which have a capacity of 50,000, currently hold more than 100,000 people.

The UN has reported a shortage of latrines and a lack of reliable access to clean water. The camps have already been hit by outbreaks of disease including thousands of cases of hepatitis, dysentery and chickenpox. In June alone, there were 8,000 cases of diarrhea.

Access to medical care is completely inadequate. The French-based Doctors Without Borders reported that some doctors are seeing 200 to 300 patients a day. When night time emergencies occur, the fate of patients is left up to the personnel on duty who decided whether the person is referred to a hospital or not.

The Sri Lankan government's indefinite and arbitrary incarceration of nearly 300,000 men, women and children in detention camps is an outrage. The working class in Sri Lanka and internationally must take a stand against this gross abuse of democratic rights and demand the immediate and unconditional release and resettlement of all detainees and the provision of jobs, proper shelter and services.



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