

Sri Lanka: Jaffna University students speak to WSWS

Subash Somachandran
11 August 2009

Jaffna University students and staff recently spoke with WSWS correspondents over the run-down state of the campus, its desperate lack of basic facilities and the ongoing military repression in the northern Sri Lankan town of Jaffna.

Despite the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May, Jaffna remains under heavy army occupation with extensive roadblocks and constant patrols. The names of the students have been withheld to protect them from persecution by the security forces.

During the protracted 26-year civil war, student leaders were regularly targeted by the Sri Lankan military. Several fled the country fearing for their lives. Many of those who remained behind were killed or disappeared by pro-government death squads operating in collusion with the military.

“We still face threats from the military,” one student told the WSWS. “It has sent spies onto the campus and is monitoring what we and our union are doing. We have been denied our freedom of expression.

“[Sri Lankan President] Rajapakse totally militarised Jaffna,” he continued. “The university remained closed for nearly one and a half years—from 2005 to 2006—and in 2007 the student federation’s office was broken into and its computers seized by the military. In January 2008, Jaffna District Student Union leader Panchacharam Kunenthiran, who came to the office, was shot dead.”

Facilities and staffing at the university are woeful, well below the poor conditions in tertiary institutions in Colombo and other parts in the south of the island. Rooms lack proper lighting, with most light bulbs fused or broken. The electric fans are not working. The university furniture is dirty and student reading rooms

are filled with dust. Crows and dogs roam the university canteen. Students have complained to the vice chancellor but to no avail.

One science student explained: “There is not a single electric fan in our faculty. We don’t receive up-to-date quality education here because there are no modern education facilities and methods. There are no Internet facilities and although we have computers there is no room in which to use them. There is no new equipment in our labs and when the war resumed [in mid-2006] we stopped receiving chemicals for scientific work.

“Our study period is supposed to be three years but we won’t finish our courses in less than four years. I began my university studies in 2005, the same time as one of my brothers began his studies in the same field at the University of Kelaniya [in a Colombo suburb]. He has completed his studies and is now working. We are wasting our time here and several students have abandoned their courses.”

The student hostels, he said, were overcrowded and unhealthy: “In the female hostel four girls have to share a single room and the water is contaminated with bacteria. A water sample was sent to Colombo [for testing] and we are waiting for results, but students are still using this water. Students are not receiving regular scholarship payments and although there is a medical centre in the university there is a severe shortage of drugs.”

Douglas Devananda, Sri Lanka’s minister for social services and the leader of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), addressed a local council election meeting at the university on July 3. Only handful of students attended but the minister brought a busload of unemployed graduates and promised them jobs.

The EPDP is notorious for its active support of the

government's criminal war against the Tamil people. It headed the candidate list of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance in last weekend's local elections in Jaffna and Vavuniya.

A lecturer told the WSWs: "Thirty years of war has cut off this university from the rest of the country. Students have no chance of communicating with other communities and they lack fluency in other languages, especially in English. There are no facilities for poor students to support their studies and the hostel facilities are inadequate."

The university's law faculty began in May 2005 with just two lecturers, but they left Jaffna in 2006 when the Rajapakse government resumed its war against the LTTE. Since then there have been no permanent lecturers, no library nor any computer facilities.

The law faculty currently provides only two units, with first-year students studying in Jaffna and second- and third-year classes held in Colombo. Students attending the Colombo campus have to pay about 10,000 rupees (\$US90) per month for their expenses. One law student said: "We are not getting a satisfactory education and not learning in a campus atmosphere. We're unable to participate in the cultural events and are living in a totally isolated situation."

Arts faculty lectures are currently being held in the university's public lecture theatre, which was originally built for special events.

A university employee explained the situation confronting medical students: "There are no specialists in anatomy section and no senior lecturers in pathology. Specialists are reluctant to come to Jaffna because there is no change in the war situation here. For second-year students, there are not enough lecturers to cover the syllabus and for the third year there are only two junior lecturers, who are teaching six subjects. Psychology is taught by a visiting lecturer."

Students from former LTTE-held areas to the south of Jaffna such as Kilinochchi, Mannar and Mullaithivu, face even greater difficulties. Most of the population—nearly 300,000 people—have been incarcerated in military-run internment centres. About 100 Jaffna University students are believed to be detained. Many more have family members in these camps.

A student federation representative told the WSWs: "There are about 300 university students who depend

solely on university assistance because their parents are detained in camps. They are very badly affected—financially and mentally."

While students were deeply hostile to President Rajapakse and his government, many were critical of the oppressive, anti-democratic methods used by the LTTE.

One student said: "No party is going to fight for the rights of the Tamil people, all they're concerned about is defending their own interests. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) previously represented the LTTE. It has 22 MPs but couldn't do anything to defend the Tamil people from the genocidal war. Now they claim India and the international powers are standing with them and appeal for support of these powers. They're doing nothing for the release of those detained in the camps."

Another student added: "One reason why the LTTE was defeated in the Vanni was because they were isolated from the people and oppressed them through their own petty government. Our students are not interested in this election [for the Jaffna municipality]. While 300,000 people are detained in the refugee camps, we don't need an election."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact