

Sri Lankan army fires on Tamil detainees

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Last Saturday Sri Lankan soldiers fired on unarmed Tamil civilians being held in a Manik Farm detention camp near the northern town of Vavuniya. A six-year-old girl, Nitharshika, was seriously injured. A 10-year-old boy and a middle-aged man also received gunshot injuries.

The shooting demonstrates once again that these centres are not “welfare villages” as the government falsely claims, but internment camps run by the military. About 280,000 Tamil civilians, who fled the fighting in the final weeks of the government’s communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have been detained indefinitely in these centres.

The incident on Saturday took place at the Ananda Coomaraswamy camp—one of the four huge camps in Manik Farm where 160,000 people have been interned in squalid conditions. The detainees include men and women, children and the elderly, all of whom are treated as “terrorist suspects”.

The Defence Ministry claimed on its website that the shooting took place when security forces tried to stop a group of people from entering Zone 2 from Zone 1 (the Coomaraswamy camp). According to the military, a gathering crowd started to pelt soldiers with stones. The soldiers opened fire in “self-defence” when a man allegedly tried to lob a grenade.

The defence ministry’s claims have no credibility whatsoever. In the course of the war that ended in May, the military routinely lied about and covered its crimes. According to UN estimates, around 7,000 civilians were killed in the final weeks of fighting by the military’s indiscriminate shelling and bombing. The defence ministry denied any civilian casualties.

The claim that a detainee had a grenade has all the hallmarks of a fabrication to justify the use of automatic weapons against unarmed civilians. The camps are surrounded by barbed wire and heavily patrolled by soldiers, both inside and outside. All media are barred and aid organisations operate under severe restrictions.

An eyewitness told the WSWs that government claims that the detainees were trying to move “illegally” from one area to another, or attempting to escape were false.

At the insistence of the detainees, the camp administration had opened a small path between two of the Manik Farm camps and allowed a very limited number of people to use it. Women in particular used the opportunity to collect firewood, which they desperately needed for cooking. In the previous week, raw rations rather than cooked food had been distributed. Without firewood, there was little to eat.

On Saturday, after women returned from collecting firewood, they were questioned and beaten by soldiers. Angry onlookers began to throw stones at the soldiers, who responded by opening fire. At first, the army refused to allow the injured to be taken to hospital and only relented when the protest continued.

The three injured were taken to Chettikulam hospital and the girl was later transferred to Vavuniya hospital. Her parents do not know what has happened to their child. A UN Human Rights Commission press release reported that she was paralysed.

On Saturday evening, the military began a crackdown at the Coomaraswamy detention centre. Troops entered

the camp, arrested 19 youth and handed them over to the police as suspects in the “attack” on soldiers.

The following day the army stationed a large number of troops outside the camp and began an extensive search inside. Soldiers questioned detainees and checked their registration papers. While no arrests were made, the operation was clearly aimed at intimidating the internees.

The protest on Saturday against the beating of the women points to growing anger and discontent. A detainee told the WSWS: “[It is like] we are trapped in a dangerous cave. We do not know when a brute will eat us. We can’t speak about our rights. We must be released.”

The government is holding the Tamil civilians in violation of the country’s constitution and legal system. They have not been charged with any crime, nor are they being held under the draconian emergency laws and Prevention of Terrorism Act that allow for indefinite detention without trial.

Previously, the government pledged that 80 percent of detainees would be released and resettled within 180 days. That promise had proved to be another lie. President Mahinda Rajapakse told at an election propaganda meeting on Monday that he would not resettle refugees “for the sake of doing it to please certain sections.”

The government insists that it has to screen inmates for “terrorist suspects”. Amnesty International estimates that 10,000 to 12,000 young men and women have been interrogated and dragged away to irregular detention centres. They do not have “any access to family members or legal counsel and have not appeared in court”.

On September 22, another clash took place between the military and detainees after a young man, Chandramorgan, was seriously injured. The army shot him as he allegedly attempted to escape from the Poonthotham Teachers Training College detention centre in Vavuniya.

The government’s second excuse for the continuing detention is that the former war zones must be cleared of mines before resettlement can take place. But that is just a recipe for dragging out the process indefinitely until the government’s plans are in place. The army is preparing for a long-term occupation, boosting troop numbers and building new bases in former LTTE-held territory.

All of the major powers have tacitly backed the Sri Lankan government’s gross abuse of democratic rights. The US and European powers have made limited criticisms of the lack of access to the camps—not out of concern for the detainees, but as a political lever to strengthen their influence in Colombo. For its part, the UN has called for speedier resettlement, but continues to pay millions of dollars towards the upkeep of these prison camps.

India, on the other hand, joined China, Russia and other countries in May in blocking any criticism of Sri Lanka by the UN Human Rights Council over its war crimes and treatment of Tamil civilians. Just before Saturday’s shooting, India’s High Commissioner Alok Prasad visited the Vavuniya camps and met with the military commander in charge. He pledged the Indian government’s continued support for Sri Lanka’s “resettlement” program, despite the fact that the government has announced no such plans.

The army shooting underscores the urgency of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally demanding the immediate, unconditional release of the detainees, the dismantling of the internment camps and an end to the military occupation of the North and East. These men, women and children, who have already suffered the trauma of war, must be provided with proper homes, jobs and essential services.



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