

The Sri Lankan government's "resettlement" of Tamil detainees

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The Sri Lanka government last Thursday carried out a much-publicised "resettlement" of around 6,000 Tamil detainees held in internment camps near Vavuniya. Every aspect of the exercise was a fraud designed to deflect criticism at home and internationally over the detention of Tamil civilians following the defeat in May of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Around 250,000 Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone in the final stages of the conflict were herded into military-controlled camps. The majority—about 160,000 men, women and children—are being held in the huge Manik Farm camp at Chettikulam near Vavuniya. While termed "refugees", the civilians are not permitted to leave the camps. They are effectively being treated as prisoners of war in breach of the country's constitution and laws.

At a government ceremony last Thursday, senior presidential adviser Basil Rajapakse, who is one of President Mahinda Rajapakse's brothers, declared that "41,685 individuals [have] started returning to their original villages" and "will go to their villages gradually within few days". Rehabilitation Minister Rishad Badurdheen told the BBC that 5,700 had left the camps and another 36,000 would be resettled in the coming weeks in the Vavuniya, Mullaithivu, Kilinochchi and Mannar districts.

Last weekend's *Sunday Times* explained: "The government claimed that the IDPs [internally displaced persons] were sent to their homes, but reports said they had not gone to their homes. Questions have arisen when some of them were brought back to the camps while others were sent to transit camps or temporary shelters set up in schools and other government buildings."

At Manthai West in Mannar, where the ceremony took place, around 1,200 detainees had been brought from the Manik Farm camps for resettlement. Journalists, who are barred from the detention centres, were encouraged to attend

the media event. The IDPs were lined up for the cameras and reporters were told they were being sent back to their homes.

However, as the *Sunday Times* noted, the people "were asked to board the buses parked outside, but after a short ride, they were brought back to the original location where the ceremony took place. It was more a photo-opportunity for the journalists."

The article also reported: "Other groups who were released earlier have also not reached their homes. A group of IDPs who were released to be resettled in Mullaithivu... were instead taken to transit camps in schools and government buildings at Thunukkai." Government officials have tried to justify the move by saying their homes had been badly damaged or destroyed.

The government has been under mounting pressure to release the detainees. A fortnight ago, a parliamentary delegation from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu was told that 50,000 refugees would be released within 15 days. The public relations charade at Manthai West was no doubt designed to give the impression that the government was keeping its word. In May, the government claimed that it would resettle all refugees within six months.

The transfer of detainees to smaller transit camps and holding centres also serves another purpose. There is growing anger and hostility in the huge Mannar Farm centres where conditions are appalling—food, housing, water supplies, medical care are all inadequate. At least two protests have been violently suppressed by soldiers guarding the camps. The government and military are no doubt seeking to prevent a large-scale rebellion by dispersing some detainees to smaller centres.

The real purpose of the mass detention is to intimidate the island's Tamil minority. An estimated 10,000 to 12,000 young men and women have been seized at these internment

camps as “LTTE suspects” and transferred to secret centres. Amnesty International has noted that these detainees do not have “any access to family members or legal counsel and have not appeared in court”.

Basil Rajapakse told the state-owned *Daily News* on Friday that “up to now nearly 100,000 or almost half of the total number had been resettled”. However, apart from some elderly people and children, the government has released only 10,000 detainees. That “release” in September was also a public relations exercise timed to coincide with the visit of UN official Even Lynn Pascoe to Vavuniya. At least half were sent to detention camps in their home districts.

The government claims that resettlement is only possible once the areas have been de-mined and facilities built. But nearly six months after the end of the conflict, the focus of reconstruction is not the building of homes, schools and hospitals destroyed in 26 years of war, but the preparation for a permanent military occupation of these areas.

During the final year of the war, the military seized large swathes of LTTE-held territory, stretching from Mannar on the north-west coast to Mullaithivu on the east coast of the island. The vast bulk of the population is either in the detention camps or has fled. New military camps and police stations are being established in these areas. The army is recruiting 50,000 more troops to reinforce its control in the North and the East.

Five Security Forces Headquarters have been established—two in the former LTTE strongholds of Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu. The military is also planning a new coastal guard system to patrol the seas to the north and east of the island. According to Tamil National Alliance parliamentarian Suresh Premachandran, a huge 150-acre army camp is being built at Kilinochchi.

The government has already set up 37 new police stations in the East and eight in the North. Four more police stations are to be located in the Kilinochchi district. A police training college is to be established in Mullaithivu.

The main A-9 highway connecting Colombo to Jaffna on the northern tip of the island has been opened to a limited passenger bus service. Buses are accompanied by military escorts. A resident of Jaffna who recently travelled on the bus told the WSWs that there was no sign of civilian habitation anywhere in former LTTE territory. From Meesalai on the Jaffna Peninsula to Omanthai near Vavuniya, a distance of about 110 kilometres, two armed

soldiers were deployed every 100 metres, and there was a small military post every 500 metres. Passengers were not allowed out of the bus.

The Rajapakse government is planning to turn the former LTTE territory into a cheap labour platform. That process is already well under way in the East, which was “liberated” in 2007. A Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has been established near Trincomalee and two more are planned in Batticaloa and Ampara. In the North, Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu have been earmarked for SEZs.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka has launched a campaign to demand the immediate release of all Tamil detainees, the dismantling of the camps, assistance to the refugees to rebuild their lives and the immediate withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East.

The SEP urges workers, youth and all those concerned with defending democratic rights to support our campaign by sending letters, holding meetings and organising protests to condemn the Sri Lankan government and demand the immediate and unconditional release of all Tamil detainees.

Letters should be directed to:

Gotabhaya Rajapakse,
Secretary of Defence, Public Security, Law & Order.
Ministry of Defence, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
Email: gotabaya@defence.lk

Lalith Weeratunga
Permanent Secretary to the President of Sri Lanka
Old Parliament Building, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Please send copies to:
Socialist Equality Party,
301 1/1,
Main Road, Attidiya, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka.
Tel/Fax: 0094 11 2712104

World Socialist Web Site,
E-mail: editor@wsws.org



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact