

Demand the release of Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and the *World Socialist Web Site* are launching an international campaign to demand the immediate and unconditional release of more than 250,000 Tamil civilians who have been detained in huge internment camps since the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May.

The government falsely describes these squalid prison camps as “welfare villages.” However, detainees are not permitted to move in or out of their camps, which are surrounded by barbed wire fences and guarded by heavily armed soldiers. Relatives are allowed to see inmates only after the type of rigorous screening found in high security prisons.

Those inside are civilians—young and old, men and women—who lived in former LTTE-held territory and were simply herded into the camps. They had already suffered months of military blockade, with many starved, dehydrated, wounded and sick. Numbers had lost family and friends as a result of the army’s indiscriminate shelling.

Conditions inside the camps are appalling. There is inadequate food, sanitation, medical care, sufficient water or even space to sleep. Moreover, the military, which runs the camps, maintains an internal regime of terror and intimidation. Despite heavy media censorship, cases have filtered out involving the sexual abuse of women, the shooting of protesting prisoners and “disappearances”. Military intelligence personnel systematically interrogate young men and women. More than 10,000 have been branded as “LTTE suspects” and dragged off to “rehabilitation centres”, which are notorious for abuse and torture.

President Mahinda Rajapakse insists that forced detention is necessary to weed out “terrorists”, but none in the detention camps or the rehabilitation centres have been charged, let alone convicted, of any crime. In reality, the government is engaged in the collective punishment of a quarter of a million people solely because they are Tamils. In effect, they are being treated as prisoners of war, in flagrant breach of the country’s own constitution and laws.

The detention camps graphically underscore the communal character of the war that was waged by successive governments from 1983. This was not a “war on terrorism”, but a conflict aimed at entrenching the privileged position of the island’s Sinhala elites at the expense of their Tamil counterparts and all working people. Its roots lie in the decades of official anti-Tamil discrimination utilised by the Colombo political establishment, from the time of independence in 1948, to buttress its rule by dividing the working class.

Sri Lanka’s prison camps have few historical precedents. One is compelled to go back to the 1899-1902 Boer War, when the British pioneered the concentration camp and incarcerated the Boers, or to the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans in the US during World War II. However, for the systematic persecution of an entire people, the only real precedent is the Nazi concentration camps during World War II, where millions of Jews, as well as trade unionists, socialists and communists were herded, and many killed.

Increasingly the Rajapakse regime functions as a politico-military cabal, openly flouting the constitution, the legal system and the courts. Parliament has become a powerless rubber stamp for decisions made by the president, his brothers, close advisers and top generals. The police state apparatus built up during a quarter century of war, and strengthened under Rajapakse, remains intact. Far from demobilising soldiers in the aftermath of the war, the government is boosting the army and transforming the North and East into a vast military camp.

Having mortgaged the country to the hilt to pay for the war, Rajapakse confronts a profound economic crisis, compounded by the global recession. He has already announced a new “economic war” to force the working class and the poor to bear heavy new economic burdens. The SEP warns that the methods that have been used to terrorise the island’s Tamil minority—arbitrary detention, “disappearances” and murder by pro-government death squads—will be used to suppress opposition by all working people.

The campaign to free the Tamil detainees is an essential component of the broader fight to defend the democratic rights and living standards of the working class as a whole. The closure of the prison camps must go hand in hand with an end to the military occupation of the North and East and the withdrawal of all troops. In this struggle, no confidence can be placed in the various opposition parties or on the “international community”.

Not one of the opposition parties has challenged the mass detention of Tamils. Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the right-wing United National Party, instead offered to support the introduction of draconian new regulations under the Public Security Ordinance to “legalise” the government’s anti-democratic measures. For its part, the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna has publicly supported the internment camps, asking only for the president to establish an all-party committee to alleviate the problems facing detainees.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of bourgeois Tamil parties that acted as a mouthpiece for the LTTE, has not demanded the detainees’ immediate release. After meeting with Rajapakse last month, TNA leader R. Sambandan declared that his party would “work with the government to alleviate the conditions of the IDPs [internally displaced persons] and to facilitate their early resettlement.”

The LTTE itself has launched no campaign for the release of the Tamil civilians. Its so-called transnational government in exile issued a statement in August over the detention of its leader, requesting “the international community to secure a speedy solution to the plight of the 300,000 civilians, as well as to ensure that Mr Pathmanathan receives the protection of all international norms.”

As for the middle class ex-left groups—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—they have also stepped in to promote the illusion that the “international community” will come to the detainees’ rescue. The USP has appealed to the major powers to block an IMF loan as a means of forcing the Rajapakse government to release them. The NSSP has simply hailed the US and European powers for their limited criticisms of the government’s human rights record.

In reality, the major powers accept the government’s prison camps, just as they tacitly backed Rajapakse’s renewed communal war. For all its calls for “greater access” and “early resettlement”, the UN foots the bill and is thus directly responsible for the Tamil civilians’ incarceration. To date it has handed over \$180 million for the running of the camps.

Likewise, the limited criticisms expressed by the US and European powers have nothing to do with any genuine concern

for democratic rights. The US stalled on the IMF loan, but eventually allowed it to go through. Its hypocritical concern over human rights in Sri Lanka is simply a convenient means to pressure the Colombo government and counter the influence of rival powers in the country, particularly China.

As for India, China and Russia, their contempt for the Tamil masses was graphically illustrated at a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in May, when they pushed through a resolution praising the Sri Lankan government’s victory in its criminal war.

On this as every other issue, the appeals by the NSSP and USP to the “international community” stem from their hostility to any independent mobilisation of the working class, the only social force capable of mounting a genuine struggle for the democratic rights of Tamils and the entire working class.

The SEP calls on all workers to demand the release of the Tamil detainees and for billions of rupees to be provided to help them rebuild their shattered lives. Sinhala workers, in particular, must come to the direct aid of their Tamil class brothers and sisters. The campaign must be based, not on worthless appeals to the imperialist powers and the den of international gangsters known as the UN, but on a turn to the working class throughout South Asia and around the world.

The working class in every country has a responsibility to defend the democratic rights of working people in Sri Lanka. The Rajapakse government’s actions are only a particularly sharp expression of international processes. Under the banner of the “war on terrorism”, governments around the world, with the US in the lead, are tearing up long-standing legal norms as they prepare for new wars abroad and deepening class conflict at home. The defence of democratic rights is intimately bound up with a struggle against the outmoded capitalist order and for the complete refashioning of society on socialist lines.

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.



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