Phoney Indian concern about Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka

Sarath Kumara
19 October 2009

A delegation of parliamentarians from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu arrived in Sri Lanka on October 10 to visit the country's detention camps, where more than 250,000 Tamil civilians have been incarcerated since the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in May.

The trip was a cynical public relations exercise on both sides. For the Sri Lankan government, it was an opportunity to enlist the support of Indian politicians to cover up its gross abuse of democratic rights. The Colombo government describes the centres as "welfare villages" but the Tamil civilians are not permitted to leave the camps, which are run by the military, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by soldiers. Entry into the camps is barred to the media and opposition politicians, and aid organisations operate under severe restrictions.

For their part, the Indian delegation was seeking reassurances, no matter how empty, to placate public opinion in Tamil Nadu as well as exploring economic opportunities in the military-controlled North and East of Sri Lanka. Tamil Nadu has longstanding ties with the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. The final offensives against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), during which the Sri Lankan military indiscriminately bombarded LTTE-held territory, killing thousands of civilians, provoked widespread protests in Tamil Nadu.

The delegation consisted of 10 representatives of the ruling parties in Tamil Nadu—the Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam (DMK), Congress (I) and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi. It also included Kanimozhi, the daughter of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi and a former union (national) minister T. R. Baalu. No opposition party was represented.

The delegation gave no press conferences in Colombo. On its return to India, however, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi, who received a report, said he was "satisfied" with the work of the Sri Lankan government. He claimed that the delegation had been reassured that "more than 58,000 Tamils would be sent to their respective villages within 15 days and the rest would be gradually resettled in their native places".

However, as a Sri Lankan parliamentarian told yesterday's *Sunday Times*, the plan to resettle 58,000 detainees had been in the pipeline for a while. Facing international criticism, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse had originally planned to resettle all "refugees" within six months. Even if the government keeps its latest promise, there will still be more than 200,000 civilians inside its prison camps.

The stock pretext by the Colombo government for the delays is that the military needs to de-mine the areas before any resettlement. As reported in the *Hindu*, Sri Lankan defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse told the Indian delegation that the LTTE remained a threat and that many unidentified LTTE cadres were still in the camps. In other words, a quarter of a million civilians are being treated as prisoners of war, arbitrarily detained and deprived of their basic legal and constitutional rights.

The *Hindu* reported that the delegation had held discussions on the resumption of transport links between northern Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. Indian big business, particularly in Tamil Nadu, is keen to exploit the economic opportunities opening up on the island following the end of the 26-year war.

The appalling conditions inside the camps could not be completely ignored. A Congress representative on the delegation, Aaron Rashid, told the *Sunday Times* that detainees had complained of "the acute shortage of water" and "pregnant women were particularly distressed". Rashid spoke of the inadequacy of the housing and food, and the danger of flooding during the coming monsoon season.

However, neither the Tamil Nadu state government nor the Congress-led national government has publicly criticised the Rajapakse regime in Colombo over its treatment of Tamil detainees. According to Reuters, the Indian government offered Sri Lanka another $100 million to help resettle the detainees and rebuild the war-ravaged North, contingent on a plan of action from Colombo. A similar package in July made no difference to fate of the detainees and only underscored India's

© World Socialist Web Site

tacit support for these prison camps.

A comment by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) on October 10, calling for the immediate release of all detainees, highlighted the conditions facing the Tamil detainees. Noting that there had been clashes between camp residents and the military, HRW's Asian director Brad Adams said: "With all these people penned up unnecessarily in terrible conditions, the situation in these camps is getting tense and ugly. If they aren't out of there before the monsoons hit, their lives and health will be in serious danger."

According to the UN, by the end of September, the number of detainees stood at 255,551. HRW explained that the government's claim last month to have returned 40,000 people to their districts were simply false. In reality, many of the people "have been transferred from Manik Farm to other detention camps, while others are still held at a 'way station', a temporary holding facility, in Vavuniya."

Adams accused the government of lying. "While the government has the right to screen displaced persons for security reasons, the process has turned into a ruse to hold as many Tamils for as along as possible in the camps. The government's untruthful statements and promises should not fool anybody anymore," he said.

The HRW statement referred to the deteriorating conditions inside the camps, particularly the lack of water. Inmates of the large Manik Farm centre pointed out that because of low water levels in the nearby river, only limited water had been pumped since October 5. Though the recommended minimum is 15 litres of water per person per day, a family gets only 30 litres per day, regardless of its size.

A detainee, Jeevitha, told HRW: "This morning I managed to get only 20 litres for our family of five. I won't be able to get more until tomorrow and this water is all we have for drinking, cooking, washing and bathing. For the last three days we have not been able to take a bath or clean properly. It is agony, and the camp administration here does not seem to care about us."

The strong winds in late September and early October damaged shelters and exacerbated already difficult living conditions. Another detainee, Kumaravel, said: "The winds are tearing branches off the trees and tin sheets off the huts, which then fall on the tents. We are forced to cook outside and the wind blows dust and mud into our food, making it practically inedible. It is very difficult to live here."

The camps are grossly overcrowded. In Zone 2 of Manik Farm, 52,000 refugees share facilities that according to UN standards should hold no more than 29,000 people. Kumaravel's family lives in this zone and shares a tent with another family of four. While the women sleep inside, the men sleep outside or in makeshift classrooms. The emergency tents and shelters set up in April and May, which were designed to last three to six months, are also deteriorating.

The Socialist Equality Party has launched a campaign to demand the immediate release of all Tamil detainees, the closure of the camps, proper assistance to the refugees to rebuild their lives and the withdrawal of security forces from the North and East of Sri Lanka. The SEP calls on workers, young people and all those concerned with the defence of democratic rights to send protest letters to the Sri Lankan authorities.

The author also recommends:
Demand the release of Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka
[7 October 2009]

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
PO Box 1270, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

World Socialist Web Site at http://www.wsws.org/wsws/dd-formmailer/dd-formmailer.php

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site