

End the persecution of Tamil asylum seekers by Sri Lankan and Australian governments

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The plight of Tamils living in intolerable conditions in Sri Lanka has been brought into sharp relief by the tragic drowning of 12 asylum seekers last Sunday after their small vessel sank in the Indian Ocean as they sought to reach Australia.

The Australian government's "Fortress Australia" immigration policies, which force asylum seekers to undertake increasingly hazardous journeys in small, unseaworthy boats, are directly responsible for the drownings. But the Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse is also culpable. The desperation of Tamils to flee Sri Lanka is a product of the policies of his government.

Having narrowly won office in 2005, President Rajapakse restarted the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in mid-2006, openly breaching the 2002 ceasefire. With the tacit backing of all the major and regional powers, including Australia, the Sri Lankan military waged a ruthless war of attrition, indiscriminately bombing and shelling civilians in LTTE-held areas.

In the final months of the war that ended in May, the UN estimated that at least 7,000 civilians were killed, many in the army's self-declared No Fire Zone. Many more were injured and maimed. Rajapakse boasted that he had "liberated" Tamils from the LTTE, but the claim is a grotesque lie. Following the fall of the LTTE, the army herded more than 250,000 civilians, many of them injured and malnourished, into squalid concentration camps that were dubbed "welfare villages".

These camps are run by the military, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by soldiers. The detainees are not permitted to voluntarily leave. Young detainees are interrogated and tens of thousands have been dragged away as "LTTE suspects" to undisclosed "rehabilitation centres," which have been notorious in the past for torture.

Life outside the detention camps is not much better. Even though the war is over, the government is boosting the armed forces and preparing for the permanent military occupation of the North and East of the island. New police stations and military camps are under construction throughout former LTTE-held territory.

Those detainees who have been released from the internment camps have been returned to villages that are constantly under

the eye of the military. Most do not have jobs or even proper shelter. They have been given no assistance. They are not permitted to travel freely. Young people are hauled in regularly for checks. As some have told the WWSWS, it is just like being in a larger detention camp.

Even in the capital of Colombo, a walk to the shops or a bus ride to work for Tamils is a hazardous venture. Despite the end of the war, there are military checkpoints, roadblocks and heavily armed troops everywhere. Vehicles and pedestrians are stopped and checked. Bus passengers can be ordered to disembark. Discrimination begins as soon as a police officer or a soldier sees a Tamil name on an identity card. Questioning and harassment, interrogation at a police station, and lengthy detention without trial can all follow. All the country's draconian emergency regulations and laws remain in place and thousands of Tamils have been detained without charge or trial as terrorist suspects.

Nowhere is safe. Any one of a number of pretexts can be used to cordon off predominantly Tamil areas, search house-to-house and transport hundreds to police stations for further questioning. Even more sinister are the pro-government death squads that have "disappeared" or murdered hundreds of people, including leading journalists and politicians, over the past three years. The Committee to Monitor Investigations into Abductions and Disappearances (CMIAD) puts the number of disappeared last year at 283, and 113 so far this year, but the actual figure is certainly much higher.

Any open critic of the government is liable for harsh treatment. In a particularly graphic case, a Colombo High Court in September sentenced Tamil journalist J.S. Tissanayagam to 20 years' hard labour for publishing two articles critical of the Rajapakse government and its war. His conviction was based on an alleged confession to the police Terrorism Investigation Division, which is infamous for using torture. Tissanayagam not only retracted the "confession" in court, saying it had been signed under duress, but alleged that it had been subsequently altered to suggest that he had taken money from the LTTE.

The persecution of Tamils is not simply a product of the Rajapakse government. Just as the Australian bourgeoisie has relied on its "Fortress Australia" racism to divide workers for over a century, its Sri Lankan counterpart has rested on anti-

Tamil communalism ever since independence from Britain in 1948. One of the first actions of the newly independent government was to strip a million Tamil-speaking plantation workers of their citizenship rights.

Just as whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment is the stock-in-trade of politicians in Canberra, their counterparts in Colombo invariably turn to anti-Tamil chauvinism in times of crisis. In 1956, Sinhala was made the only state language, reducing all Tamils to the status of second-class citizens. In 1972, a new constitution made Buddhism—the religion of many Sinhalese—the state religion, thus discriminating against all other faiths, particularly Hinduism—the main religion of the Tamil minority.

Despite government denials, much of this discrimination is still in place. In practice, official business, whether it is in the courts, government offices or police stations, as well as correspondence is still largely conducted in Sinhalese and English. So pervasive is the practice that there have been cases where so-called confessions extracted under torture from “LTTE suspects” have been in Sinhalese, even though the detainee neither read nor spoke the language.

By any definition, including the restrictive one contained in the 1951 International Refugee Convention, the entire Tamil minority could qualify as refugees. In the words of the convention, all Sri Lankan Tamils have a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”.

For the most part, the media in Australia and Sri Lanka have buried these inconvenient truths about the persecution of Tamils. In an effort to vilify asylum seekers, articles have appeared in Australian newspapers raising the scare that “LTTE terrorists” are among those seeking refuge. In some cases, these comments have simply quoted uncritically the prejudiced remarks of Sri Lankan officials, who habitually treat all Tamils as “terrorists”. The very fact that a quarter of a million Tamil civilians are being held as virtual prisoners of war speaks volumes about the attitude of the entire Colombo political establishment toward Tamils.

The Sri Lankan government uses the term “terrorist” as a pretext for its anti-democratic measures and to obscure the political origins of the LTTE and the civil war. The LTTE emerged as a bourgeois nationalist movement in response to decades of official discrimination against the island’s Tamil minority. Its terror attacks on Sinhala civilians, which paled beside the atrocities carried out by the military, flowed from its bankrupt communal perspective of a separate capitalist state of Eelam for Tamils. This was advanced in opposition to the perspective of the Trotskyist movement, which sought to unify the Sri Lankan working class as a whole, regardless of ethnicity, in the struggle for socialism. Civil war began in 1983 after a horrific anti-Tamil pogrom by pro-government thugs across the island, which claimed hundreds of lives and destroyed thousands of Tamil homes and businesses.

If there are former LTTE cadres on the boats heading for Australia, they are certainly “refugees” under international law. If returned to Sri Lanka, LTTE members would be immediately jailed without charge or trial and face the danger of torture or worse.

It is no accident that persecution of Tamils, in Sri Lanka and those fleeing on small boats, is intensifying now. Around the world, the poisonous fumes of nationalism, racism and communalism emerging everywhere are an unmistakable symptom of a diseased and decaying social order. In response to the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, the political representatives of the profit system fear above all a unified political movement of the international working class fighting for their class interests and the fashioning of better world on socialist lines.

The unification of the working class is not a hazy pipedream. Never before in history have workers been so closely integrated through the global processes of production and are exploited in many cases by the same transnational corporations. The integration of the working class requires an international party that is intransigently opposed to all forms of nationalism and racism. The Socialist Equality Parties of Sri Lanka and Australia stand shoulder to shoulder in this fight, together with their sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

We call on workers in Australia, Sri Lanka and internationally to come to the aid of asylum seekers wanting refuge in Australia and to demand the ending of all immigration restrictions. Working people should have the right to live, work or study in any corner of the globe with full citizenship rights. At the same time, we call for the immediate end to all anti-democratic laws in Sri Lanka and the release of all Tamils currently held in detention camps and “rehabilitation centres”. Billions of dollars must be allocated to help these victims of war rebuild their shattered lives.



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