

Sri Lankan government announces “release” of Tamil detainees

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The Sri Lankan government announced last Saturday that it would grant “freedom of movement” from December 1 to hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians held inside military-controlled detention camps. It also announced that all camps would be closed and civilians “resettled” in their home villages and towns by January 31.

The decision, taken in the face of mounting criticism internationally and in Sri Lanka of the detention centres, is utterly hypocritical. Since the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in mid-May, the government has prepared a permanent military occupation in former LTTE-held areas. The “released” civilians will continue to be subject to prison-like restrictions on their movement and activities.

The army detained around 280,000 Tamil civilians who fled the fighting in the final stages of the war and herded them into what it termed “welfare villages”. The largest at Manik Farm near the northern town of Vavuniya holds around 160,000 men, women and children.

The “internally displaced persons (IDPs)” or “refugees” have been treated as prisoners of war. The camps are run by the military, guarded by heavily-armed soldiers and surrounded by barbed and razor wire. None of the detainees have been permitted to come and go. Visitors have to undergo rigorous screening before being allowed to see their friends and relatives.

The government claims to have speeded up resettlement and that only 130,000 people remain in the camps. The figures cannot be verified as the government has barred the media and placed restrictions on the handful of international aid agencies allowed into the centres. More than 10,000 young men and women have been interrogated and are being held without charge as “LTTE suspects” in separate “rehabilitation centres” with no outside access.

President Mahinda Rajapakse’s brother Basil, who is chairman of the Northern Rehabilitation Task Force, announced the decision to open the camps with great fanfare. “They are free to move in and out of the camps and could even go home if they wished,” he said. Resettlement, however, would be only to so-called “cleared areas” deemed secure by the military.

Basil Rajapakse said the military had agreed that the detainees no longer posed a threat—an indication that the generals exercise a virtual veto over such decisions. Previously the government insisted that the

detainees, including young children and the elderly, could not leave the camps or go home because “LTTE terrorists” were hiding among them. The forced detention of more than a quarter of a million Tamil civilians underscores the communal character of the country’s protracted war, in which all Tamils were regarded as the enemy.

The government’s decision to release the detainees has nothing to do with any concern for democratic rights. The announcement was made just days before President Rajapakse called early presidential elections for January 23. It is an obvious attempt to shore up support among Tamil politicians in his ruling coalition and to blunt widespread disgust and opposition among broad layers of voters, particularly Tamils.

The closure of the camps is also aimed at ending criticism by the US and European Union over the lack of access to the detention centres and more broadly over human rights. The US State Department recently compiled a report cataloguing more than a hundred possible war crimes committed by the military in the final months of the war. The UN estimates that at least 7,000 civilians were killed by the army’s indiscriminate bombardment of LTTE-held areas, including hospitals. One reason for the detention camps was to prevent anyone from exposing the government’s lies that no civilians were killed by the military.

The US and the EU, both of which tacitly supported Rajapakse’s communal war, are no defenders of democracy or human rights. Colombo’s conduct of the war, including the arbitrary detention of civilians, was modelled on the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US and EU are exploiting the issue of war crimes and democratic rights as leverage to strengthen their economic and strategic influence in Colombo at the expense of their rivals, particularly China.

UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes has previously been critical of the camps, even as the UN contributed substantial funds toward their operation. He praised the decision to resettle all detainees but expressed reservations about “the quality of the return process”. He noted that the detainees would be given a cash payment of 25,000 rupees (about \$US220) plus some other assistance, but there was “no doubt it will be a difficult process”. For people who have lost their home and possessions, the aid is completely inadequate.

In reality, the released detainees will receive little assistance and be subject to tight restrictions. A first-hand WSWWS report about the

conditions on the islands off the Jaffna peninsula found returnees crowded into the homes of friends and relatives or living in makeshift shelters (see: “Sri Lankan government resettles Tamil detainees in prison-like conditions”). None had received any aid. In towns like Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu, which were badly damaged in intense fighting, the situation will be even worse. Reconstruction has been mainly confined to building new army camps and police stations.

Those who have returned to various parts of the Jaffna Peninsula over the past few weeks have been arbitrarily barred from moving outside the resettlement area for six months, in breach of their constitutional and legal rights. Their identity cards have been specially marked and they cannot apply for new identity cards for that period. Many former residents of the Jaffna Peninsula fled and made homes for themselves in the LTTE-held Vanni region, but are being forced to return to their original villages and towns.

Assistance is also being restricted. Vavuniya Government Agent P.S.M. Charles told the *Sunday Times* that the “25,000-rupee grant and the rehabilitation and rebuilding grant will be given only to those who settle down in their original villages, especially those from Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu.” Mullaithivu Government Agent Imelda Sukumar pointed out that many people were unwilling to return to that area because their villages had been completely destroyed.

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 help them rebuild their lives and the withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East of Sri Lanka. 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.

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:
301 1/1
Main Road, Attidiya, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka.
Tel/Fax: 0094 11 2712104
World Socialist Web Site
E-mail: editor@wsws.org

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The Central Bank Employees Union in Sri Lanka passed the following resolution, which was sent to the Sri Lankan defence secretary on 12 November.

Dear Sir,

Release of Tamil civilians from detention camps in the north.

We would like to inform you that the Executive Committee of our union passed the following resolution on the above matter:

The Central Bank Employees Union completely supports the campaign to release more than 250,000 Tamil civilians detained in military-controlled detention camps in the north and to allow them go back to their villages. The Central Bank Employees Union considers the struggle to release them is part of uniting Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working people to defend democratic rights against the attacks of the government.

Tamil people—men, women and children—who were forced to flee and faced shelling and bombing in the military offensives to put the LTTE-held areas under government control, are being incarcerated in these camps. They have done no crime. They have been treated as criminals because they are Tamils. Our union condemns this communal repression.

Tamil civilians were herded into the camps in violation of the country’s Constitution, legal system and basic human rights. Although the government has named these camps as “welfare villages”, the detainees are barred from communication with the outside world and vice versa. They have been forced to live in tragic conditions, provided with only minimum food, clothing, sanitary facilities and medical facilities. More than 10,000 young men and women have been taken to other camps and put in solitary confinement.

The Central Bank Employees Union condemns these anti-democratic actions and demands the removal of these camps and the unconditional release of Tamil detainees.

President,
M.W. Piyaratna
Central Bank Employees Union.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact