

Sri Lankan government resettles Tamil detainees in prison-like conditions

Subash Somachandran
5 November 2009

The Sri Lankan government claimed last month that it had released some thousands of Tamil civilians held in the Manik Farm detention camps near Vavuniya and other northern towns to resettle in their home districts. These refugees have in fact been sent to areas under military occupation, with new prison-like conditions imposed on them.

Facing criticism internationally and within the country, President Mahinda Rajapakse announced that his government had commenced resettling about 41,000 Tamils. About 250,000 Tamil civilians during the final stages of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been incarcerated since May without charge, in violation of basic democratic rights, the country's constitution and legal system.

There is no way of verifying the government's claims of the numbers of people released. Independent journalists have been barred from the camps and drastic restrictions have been imposed on aid agencies. Neither the media nor aid agencies were permitted to scrutinise the "resettlement" following a stage-managed publicity ceremony. WSWs reporters, however, have been able to visit some of the villages where detainees have been sent.

Several thousand people from Manik Farm camps have been moved to islands in the Jaffna district. In some cases, they are staying with relatives. However, some have been left without any accommodation or live in previously abandoned houses. The islands of Kayts, Punguduthivu, Velanai, Karainagar, Nainathivu, Eluvaithivu, Analaitivu and Nedunthivu are connected to the Jaffna peninsula by bridges and causeways over shallow water.

These islands have been under military occupation since the 1990s and they are currently controlled by the navy. During the military offensive to capture these areas in the early 1990s, many people fled to the LTTE-controlled Vanni in the Northern Province.

After 1995, some people gradually came back to these islands. Others were unable to return because the military declared High Security Zones in large areas on the islands. Residents live under constant harassment by the navy and the allied paramilitary Eelam People Democratic Party (EPDP), which is a coalition partner in the Sri Lankan government.

People in these islands can only travel to and from Jaffna city after strict security checking and obtaining passes from the navy. They require the navy's permission for each visit, regardless of its purpose. A ban has been imposed on using camera phones and other electronic goods.

Recently-released detainees explained their harrowing experiences to the WSWs. Before they were brought to the Jaffna peninsula by bus from Vavuniya, they were herded into Aruvithottam, a village near the Manik Farm camps, and interrogated.

When they returned to their respective villages, the military kept them surrounded with barbed wire for a day. First they were questioned by the navy or the army. Next they were photographed separately and with their families. Then they were sent to the divisional secretary's office, where those who had relatives were allowed to stay with them, provided that the relatives signed a document taking full responsibility. Other detainees were taken separately back to the areas, which they had left more than a decade earlier.

Before processing by the divisional secretary, the navy informed relatives that the detainees "should not leave the island for six months and should not apply for new national identity cards". The navy marked the identity cards of the people brought from Vavuniya. If they leave, they will face arrest and detention without trial.

At Velanai island, the navy confiscated the identity cards of young people before they were sent to their respective villages. They were asked to return later to collect the cards. When they did, several youth were badly beaten by navy soldiers. These youth, who are all treated as LTTE suspects, have to return every Sunday to the naval camp and sign a book.

Those families looking after their relatives have received no assistance. The government has washed its hands of providing basic essentials, including food, clothes or housing. People cannot go to a hospital outside their area for medical treatment. They have been released from the hell of the Manik Farm camps, but their situation has not improved.

One refugee told the WWS: “We stayed in our relatives’ home which housed about 30 people. So as not to cause trouble to them, we decided to put up a shelter in our relatives’ land.” Another refugee said: “We came here with empty hands. We borrowed money to buy these things to put up a hut.” Coconut leaves, which are used for roofing, cost about four rupees each.

Some villages on Karainagar island, such as Thopukadu, Madathuvalavu and Rasavinthottam, have been converted into High Security Zones by the navy. Some 90 families from Thopukadu were resettled there but have no relatives to look after them. Their relatives left the island because of the navy’s restrictions. The refugees are living in 10 abandoned homes.

About 190 people attached to the Rasavinthottam and Madathuvalavu villages are being kept in seven abandoned houses. The owners of these houses were displaced in 1990. The roofs are dilapidated and unable to withstand the wet season.

A detainee sent to one of these villages said he could return to an old job some kilometres away, but no-one was allowed to travel. “We have no money. How can we survive? These houses were abandoned more than 19 years ago. Bushes have grown all around and it looks like a forest. There are lots of snakes and mosquitoes. This is looking like another Manik Farm,” he said.

Another person said: “We could survive by doing any type of work but we are unable to go leave the area. We are selling one kilo of flour of our relief supplies to get the money to buy vegetables and other items.”

Due to a drought, the wells have dried up. People have to walk a kilometre to get water. The local council supplies just 15 litres of drinking water per day for each family. A local volunteer institution provides another 30 litres of drinking water for 22 rupees.

A village dispensary is the only available hospital. Emergency patients can be sent by ambulance to Jaffna hospital, but former detainees are not free to go there. Patients must obtain a doctor’s recommendation which is screened by the navy—it is similar to the restrictions at Manik Farm.

School children have not been given uniforms, shoes or school supplies. One student said: “We were displaced in 2008. Since then we have not any schooling. At Manik Farm nothing was done for our students although there were propaganda units providing ‘education’ to us.”

One person angrily said: “When we got into the bus for resettlement in Jaffna, Douglas Devananda [EPDP leader and government minister] said we would be resettled on our own lands and given all facilities. But we cannot even go to our own land and we have no way to survive.”

The conditions facing civilians released from Manik Farm highlight their continued persecution. Hundreds of thousands more detainees have not been even considered for so-called resettlement. They continue to languish in Manik Farm and other camps.

The Socialist Equality Party and the WWS have initiated an international campaign for the immediate release of detainees, the provision of government aid needed to live decently and an end to the military occupation of the North and East. (See: “Demand the release of Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka”).

We urge workers, youth and all those who defend basic democratic rights to send letters, issue statements and organise protests demanding the unconditional release of the 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

The World Socialist Web Site
Email: editor@wsws.org



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact