

Sri Lanka: Free movement of Tamil detainees—a cynical election ploy

Sarath Kumara
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After detaining more than a quarter of a million Tamil civilians for months, the Sri Lankan government has allowed restricted free movement for the detainees from December 1 and announced the closure of the huge detention centres from January 31.

The announcement is a cynical election ploy by President Mahinda Rajapakse aimed at deflecting criticism and anger over his policy of arbitrary internment in open breach of the island's constitution and legal system. Both Rajapakse and former Army Commander, General Sarath Fonseka, the “common candidate” of the major opposition parties in the January 26 presidential poll, are responsible for this gross abuse of democratic rights.

Following the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May, the army herded around 280,000 Tamil civilians into “welfare villages”. The largest at Manik Farm near the northern town of Vavuniya housed about 160,000 people. The centres were run by the military, surrounded by razor wire and guarded by heavily armed soldiers. No one was allowed to leave, media access was banned and aid organisations were subject to extensive restrictions.

The government tried to justify its policy by claiming that the refugees could be “resettled” only after the former war zones had been de-mined. However, those who wanted to stay with friends and relatives in other parts of the island were not permitted to do so. At the same time, Rajapakse insisted that LTTE “terrorist suspects” had to be weeded out. In reality, the incarceration without charge of a quarter of a million Tamil civilians—men, women and children—simply underscores the communal character of Rajapakse's war.

Just before announcing the presidential election, Rajapakse changed tack. Since December 1, internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been permitted to leave the camps but

subject to stringent conditions. Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said on December 1 that IDPs were allowed “free movement to attend to work or visit relatives and they can come back to the camps until they are resettled”. Everyone could “leave today” if they wished, he said. But that is simply not the case.

“Free movement” is only permitted after a police check and lasts for just 10 days. Civilians who have not been formally “resettled” must return to the camps. Anyone who fails to return will receive no resettlement assistance, their relatives still in the camps could be subject to reprisal, and lacking proper identity papers they face the danger of arrest.

Rajapakse visited Manik Farm yesterday after making a trip to Putumattalan in Mullaithivu district to dedicate a monument to “war heroes”. Putumattalan was the site of fierce fighting in the final months of the war. The military had driven the LTTE into a small pocket of land. More than 200,000 civilians were crammed into a government-declared “safe zone” which the military continued to bombard indiscriminately. According to UN estimates, 7,000 civilians were killed between January and May.

At Manik Farm, Rajapakse reportedly “inspected the facilities” and “issued instructions to the relevant officials to meet all the needs of the displaced”. This cynical electioneering will do nothing to alter the squalid, overcrowded conditions in which detainees have been living for months. The camps lack adequate food, water and medical services. Many detainees have been living in tents or makeshift shelters. (See: “Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka: ‘Almost living in hell’”)

General Fonseka has been posturing as a sympathiser of the detainees, criticising the government for the conditions under which they are held. He continues to support the policy of internment, which he implemented, and has opposed Rajapakse's “ad hoc resettlement”, saying more

must be done to identify and weed out “terrorist suspects”. In other words, even the limited “free movement” must be reined in.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in the first three days of December, 22,443 people left the camps and 9,978 had already returned. Those wishing to leave had to queue for hours to fill in forms and obtain approval from the police and military. They had to indicate the date of their return and were issued with passes, not full identity cards.

Eyewitnesses told the WSWs that anyone suspected of having any connection with the LTTE was blocked from leaving. Over the past six months, the military has been interrogating young men and women, many of whom have been dragged off to secret centres. None has been charged or put on trial. According to Amnesty International, 10,000 youth have been taken away.

While limited “freedom of movement” has been granted to detainees, the media, human rights organisations and other “outsiders” are still banned from the camps. Those wanting to visit relatives inside the centres are subjected to the type of restrictions used in prisons.

As of December, the government claimed that only 130,000 people remained in the detention camps. Many of those who have not applied for even temporary leave simply have no place to go. In the final offensives of the war, the military levelled large areas of the towns and villages in LTTE-held territory. The government’s priority has not been to rebuild houses, hospitals and schools but to construct police stations and army camps to prepare for a permanent military occupation.

Those who have been “resettled” have not been given adequate assistance, are not allowed to move to other locations and are under close surveillance by the security forces. (See: “Sri Lankan government resettles Tamil detainees in prison-like conditions”) According to Additional District Secretary for Vavuniya, Thirugnana Sambanthan, the government provides resettled families with just 12 roofing sheets and 5,000 rupees (\$US44). They are forced to rely on the World Food Program for food, and UN agencies and non-government organisations for other aid.

Many of those whom the government claims to have resettled continue to be detained in “transit camps”. Speaking to the *Times*, Human Rights Minister Mahinda

Samarasinghe admitted that 70 percent of people who have been moved out of the detention centres are still being held in schools, churches and other places. He used the same pretext that was used to detain people in Manik Farm—demining had to be completed before people could be released.

A young man visiting Jaffna under the new “freedom of movement” rules told the WSWs: “I came here to visit my relatives. I filled out a form and handed it over to get the permission of authorities. Police intelligence and army officers were keeping an eye on us. I left my parents in the camp. If I fail to return my parents will be punished.

“We have registered for resettlement in Kilinochchi. So we have to wait until we are allowed. I underwent horrible experiences under the LTTE in the Vanni. We escaped in the last days of army attacks only to be put in these camps. I was unable to continue with any studies or find a job.”

Another person who recently resettled in a Jaffna fishing village, said: “We left here in 1995 for the Vanni as we could not bear the army repression. In the Vanni, we faced LTTE harassment. During [the final months of] the war, the government poured in shells. I lost my wife. The problems we faced cannot be explained in words. We struggled in the camps with disease and insufficient food.

“We were released on November 25. We were told that we would be given 25,000 rupees for resettlement expenses. But they dropped us in Jaffna giving us only 5,000 rupees. I came here with my eldest daughter’s family and we are living in my mother’s cottage. We have medical facilities here. I don’t have any faith in this government. I don’t think it will assist us to rebuild lives.”

The Socialist Equality Party, which is standing General Secretary Wije Dias in the January 26 presidential election, is campaigning for the immediate and unconditional release of all Tamil detainees, including all those held without charge as “LTTE suspects” in secret centres. We call for the withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East of the island and the provision of billions of rupees to construct proper housing, hospitals and schools and to provide the necessary aid to help people rebuild their shattered lives.



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