

Sri Lankan Tamil political prisoners stage hunger strike to demand their release

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Hundreds of Tamil political prisoners in Sri Lanka suspended a hunger strike on its eighth day January 14 after the government “promised” to look into their demands.

The hunger strikers are demanding that the government release them or, failing that, allow them to answer any accusations against them in fair and expeditiously organized trials. The prisoners, 774 of them, under detention in prisons in Colombo, Anuradhapura, Jaffna, Batticaloa and Trincomalee, had joined the protest.

President Mahinda Rajapakse pledged to look into the prisoners’ demands within two months. Running as the candidate of the ruling party in the January 26 presidential election, Rajapakse was anxious to defuse the protest for fear that it could provide a focus for the resentment and anger of the Tamil population, which has been subjected to a cruel almost three decades-long war and continuing communal repression.

Rajapakse’s promise commits him and the government to nothing in respect to releasing the detainees or even providing them a means of refuting government claims that they are terrorists.

Apart from those remanded in prisons, the Sri Lankan government has incarcerated tens of thousands of Tamils in detention centres in various parts of the country. These detentions were intensified after the Rajapakse government plunged the country back into all-out war in July 2006.

The prisoners are held under the country’s draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

This law allows the defence ministry secretary to order the detention of a person on suspicion of terrorist activity without charge for eighteen months. Thereafter, detainees have to be produced before a court, but the police working in league with the judiciary can drag out pre-trial proceedings almost interminably, meaning persons can be held for years on the basis of unproven allegations and without any legal recourse. The PTA also allows government prosecutors to use “confessions” from suspects. This constitutes nothing less than an incitement to the Sri Lankan security services—which are notorious for their use of torture—to coerce false confessions and stage frame-ups.

With its communal discrimination and violence, Sri Lanka’s Sinhala elite goaded large numbers of Tamil youth to take up arms against the government. The elite responded with a bloody counterinsurgency war and even more systematic violations of the rights of the Tamil people, including mass and, for all intents and

purposes, indefinite detentions without trial.

The government refuses to term the Tamil detainees political prisoners, labelling them, as it does anyone accused of involvement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), “terrorists.” But the government’s failure to prosecute the detainees underscores that the police have no credible evidence against them.

The prisoners who staged the hunger strike claim that their previous appeals have been ignored or, if verbally conceded, have never been acted upon. Last year prisoners staged four hunger strikes to highlight their demands.

A letter issued to the media by 35 prisoners before they embarked on the most recent hunger strike noted, “We, the political prisoners held in remand prison without any inquiry or legal action, are to launch a hunger strike from 6:00 AM on 6 January. We who have been arrested on false charges by the police under PTA and emergency regulations demand immediate release or bail or general amnesty.

“When persons who have been leading members in real militant groups have been given top posts in the government, why should we, who had nothing to do with militancy, be punished on false charges? We have lost our families, been robbed of our education, and now we are left alone without anyone.”

The two Tamil leaders to whom they were referring are former LTTE Eastern Province leaders, V. Muralitharan (otherwise known as Karuna Amman) and Sivananthurai Chandrakanthan or Pillayan. Both defected from the LTTE and supported the Sri Lankan military in its war of extermination against the LTTE. As a sop, Karuna was given a cabinet minister post while Pillayan was helped to become the chief minister of the Eastern Province.

One of the prisoners is 52-year-old K. Devadasan. A former State Film Corporation director, he was abducted in April 2008 in Kotahena, a Colombo neighbourhood, by a group of unidentified militia men or security forces who travelled in a white van.

Detained at the New Magazine Prison in Colombo, he launched his hunger strike January 1, a few days earlier than the others, so as to press his demand that authorities release or expeditiously prosecute him.

Abduction of Tamils particularly in Colombo was rampant during the past four years.

Tamils were seized by military personnel, other state agents or pro-government auxiliaries, brutalized, and later turned over to the police for detention. This terror campaign has even been extended

to media persons who criticised the government's actions. Some Sinhala trade unionists have also been abducted, with the government making the spurious charge that they were helping the LTTE.

Shortly before Rajakase promised to look into the issue of the Tamil detainees, Law Minister Milinda Moragoda said a solution would soon be found. But the government continues to insist that they are not political prisoners, but terrorists.

Arumugam Thondaman, a Cabinet minister and the leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which represents many Tamil plantation workers, told a January 20 press conference in Nuwara Eliya that 24 plantation youth who had been detained under the PTA had previously been released, another 50 would be released that day, and that 28 other prisoners were being sent to so-called rehabilitation centres. (It is not immediately clear if any of these detainees had been involved in the hunger strike.) With the end of the war and growing opposition to the CWC's imposition of a sell-out contract, Thondaman has felt renewed pressure to intercede on behalf of the detainees.

Many plantation youth were arrested during the decades of the war. Workers accuse the CWC leaders of helping police to arrest these youth by providing lists of alleged LTTE supporters. In reality, these youth had no connections to the LTTE. They were detained so as to intimidate plantation workers and their families who had fought for their rights and opposed the betrayals of the trade unions.

Many thousands of Tamil prisoners are being held in a detention centre at Boossa in southern Sri Lanka, often without the knowledge of their closest relatives. According to a report prepared by the Human Rights Commission (HRC) office in Colombo and sent to the HRC in Jaffna, 800 youths including 50 women who had been either abducted in white vans or arrested by the armed forces in Vanni have been detained in Boossa. Just a few days back, the parents of female undergraduate Rasiah Dwarka, who had been abducted by a white-van gang, were able to trace her to Boossa.

In addition to these detentions, thousands of Tamil youth have been selected for long-term detention from the mass detention camps for Tamil civilians that the government established at the war's end, particularly in Vavuniya. According to Amnesty International about 12,000 youth—LTTE cadre in the eyes of the government—have been taken into long-term detention. The Red Cross complains however that it has had access only to about 2,000 of these youth. In an attempt to appease the popular anger among Tamils over their treatment, the government has released a few dozens of these youth in recent weeks.

Amnesty International has issued a 10-point human rights agenda, which it is asking the two main presidential candidates of the ruling elite—Rajapakse and former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka—to adhere to. It includes the end of “arbitrary arrest and detention under emergency legislation.”

Nothing will come from such appeals. Every month since the war ended, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake has announced that the “terrorist threat” remains, then requested parliament to extend the emergency regulations. The government has also insisted the PTA will not be withdrawn. If the government

is so adamant that these anti-democratic measures remain in force, it is because it is anticipating mass social opposition to its plans to make the working class and toilers pay for the civil war and world economic crisis through drastic social spending cuts.

General Fonseka asserts in his election manifesto that he will keep the emergency laws, after “amending” them. Regarding the detainee issue, he emphasises that “all detainees in relation to terrorism will be prosecuted, rehabilitated or released.”

The Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the rightwing United National Party (UNP) fully support Fonseka's stance. At a Jan. 10 press conference, JVP MP Anura Kumara Disسانayake said, “[G]overnment must prosecute them (Tamil political prisoners) or release them after rehabilitation.”

During and after the war the JVP lent its support to the blanket arrests and indefinite detention of young Tamil people. As it is now supporting General Fonseka and painting him as a democrat, the JVP has slightly modified its stand. But it continues to uphold the state's “right” to arbitrarily arrest and subject to long detention without trial anyone it brands a terrorist.

Workers, youth and the island's Tamil masses should have no illusions in the democratic phrase-mongering of the crisis-ridden Sri Lankan ruling elite or any of its factions. All supported the communal war, favour the retention of a massive army, and are at most proposing a few cosmetic changes to the apparatus of state repression.

The SEP and its presidential candidate Wije Dias are demanding that all political prisoners be released immediately and unconditionally.

Through its presidential campaign, the SEP is explaining that the fight for democratic rights, including the scrapping of the PTA and the Emergency Regulations, is bound up with the abolition of the present autocratic and racially discriminative constitution and the fight for a worker and peasant government as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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