

Sri Lanka: Former Tamil detainees speak to the WSWS

Our correspondent
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Recently the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of Tamil prisoners released from various detention centres as well as the relatives of detainees still held in camps run by the Sri Lankan military. They not only described the oppressive conditions inside the camps, but insisted that their detention was a violation of basic legal and democratic rights.

Following the collapse of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, the military herded around 280,000 Tamil civilians—men, women and children—into huge “welfare villages”, which were surrounded by barbed wire and armed soldiers and run as virtual prisons. Anyone accused of being an “LTTE suspect” was held separately in undisclosed locations. The numbers grew to about 12,000 as military intelligence officers interrogated young men and women in the detention camps and dragged more “LTTE suspects” off to its secret prisons. The purpose was to intimidate and silence any opposition or dissent.

The Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, Brigadier Sudantha Ranasinghe, told the *Island* on Monday that the military had detained about 11,696 people as LTTE “suspects”, but had released only 5,586 so far. Last September, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) named Sri Lanka as the home to perhaps the world’s largest mass detention centre in an internal armed conflict.

There is no independent assessment on the number of youth seized by the military and currently in its secret prisons. The conditions inside these centres are also largely unknown. The International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) is not allowed enter these camps. The Sri Lankan security forces are notorious for torture, extra-judicial killings and “disappearances”.

The WSWS spoke to a relative of a detainee who is being held at the Welikanda “rehabilitation camp” near

Polonnaruwa. The person explained that three separate centres have been erected there with hundreds of 17-metre-long tents in the jungle, housing more than a 1,000 people. The tents are divided into six rooms, with five persons in each room. The camp is surrounded by barbed wire fences and guarded by armed soldiers.

The relative said only a few detainees had sleeping mats and pillows. The inmates were given a piece of soap, a small packet of shampoo and a packet of toothpaste each month. They were provided with three meals with rice, but the amounts were inadequate and the quality bad. Clothes and other necessities had to be provided by their families. Only parents and wives were allowed to visit.

A former detainee described the regime inside the camps. Inmates were forced to undergo systematic ideological indoctrination in Sinhala nationalism and to express their loyalty to the Colombo regime. Early every morning, detainees must attend a prayer session and the hoisting of the national flag, and recite an oath not to work against the country. Then they start the daily work of cleaning the camp, followed by heavy farm labour.

At the Welikanda camp, inmates were forced to work on huge farms, growing vegetables and corn. After returning in the evening, they were subjected to strict body searches. “Both the government and camp authorities are treating us like slaves,” another former inmate told the WSWS.

The wife of an inmate at the Welikanda detention camp explained: “My husband was a member of the LTTE several years ago, before I married him. He had no link with the LTTE after he left the group. We have four children. The oldest is eight years old. The security personnel arrested him at the Manik Farm [detention centre] and told us that he could come back after an inquiry. But he has not yet been released.”

The wife lives in a small hut with her four daughters and her mother after they lost their house and belongings during the war. “I could not visit my husband for the last two and half months, because I have no money,” she said. “To go there I have to have at least 5,000 rupees (\$US45). The ICRC provides 4,000 rupees for two persons once every two months. It is not enough for the journey. I have to travel from Jaffna to Vavuniya and stay there for a day. The parents and wives of detainees join up as groups there and arrange vans to go to Welikanda. The whole journey takes about four days.”

The husband has not been interrogated by the police or military and has not been charged with any crime. “I have received a letter from him just once in two months. Neither the Tamil National Alliance [TNA] nor any other political party is taking any measures to free these people,” the wife complained.

The TNA, a bourgeois party that acted as the LTTE’s mouthpiece during the war, is seeking an accommodation with the Colombo political establishment and has not conducted any public campaign for the release of the detainees. TNA MP Suresh Premachandran told the WSWS last month that the party had discussed the issue with Justice Minister Rauf Hakeem and President Rajapakse, calling for detainees to be charged or released. Nothing came of those discussions and the TNA has taken no further action.

A middle-aged housewife whose husband was detained in a Vavuniya camp told the WSWS: “During the war we were trying to escape from the LTTE on the one hand, and the attacks of the military on the other. I was separated from my husband due to the war. Only later, I learned that he was injured in the shelling during the final days of the war and taken prisoner by the army.”

Her living conditions were appalling. “We live in dire poverty,” she said. “Now we are staying in a relative’s house, sometimes suffering severe hunger. I’ve not been able to visit my husband for months because I have no money.” She also expressed her anger at the various Tamil-based parties for doing nothing to free the detainees and their attempts to collaborate with the government.

A recently-released young man from Jaffna said he was caught in the war in Vanni when he went there looking for a job in 2006. The LTTE forced him to undergo military training. “After some training, they sent me to fight. My leg was severely injured and was partially amputated. I was treated for three months at the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital

[inside LTTE-held territory]. At that time, the hospital was shelled by the Sri Lankan forces and many people were killed.”

He surrendered to the army during the final offensives. “They took me with others to the Ramanathan camp in Vavuniya on June 14. I thought if I told the truth the army would release me. But they took me to the Welikanda camp and kept there for one and a half years until I was released recently.”

“We thought the LTTE was fighting for the liberation of the people and supported it. We had no idea that it was a capitalist organisation. The LTTE had big hopes that America would help the Tamils. But that belief was never realised. Your ideas are new to me. It is good to unite Sinhala and Tamil people against the capitalist rulers. This unity was damaged by the war but it is necessary to rebuild it,” he said.

Over the course of a quarter century of civil war, the security forces detained tens of thousands of people, mainly Tamils, under draconian emergency powers and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which provides for indefinite detention without trial. More than 700 people detained prior to the end of the war, including 30 women, are still in custody after years in jail. One prisoner arrested in 1997 told the BBC last month that the only legal basis for his detention was a confession obtained by force.

The continued systematic abuse of the basic democratic rights of Tamil detainees is a sharp warning to working people as a whole. As it imposes the austerity measures demanded by the IMF, the regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse will not hesitate to use similar methods to suppress any resistance by workers and young people.



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