

Sri Lankan guards shoot protesting prisoners

Sampath Perera
3 February 2011

Guards at the Anuradhapura prison in the north central province of Sri Lanka shot and killed at least two inmates last week after protests erupted over squalid conditions and inadequate meals. One prisoner was killed on the spot and the other died later from severe wounds.

About 20 prisoners began a hunger strike and occupied the roof top of a prison building on January 23 to demand improved food. Following clashes in which eight jailors were injured, the prison authorities immediately called in soldiers and the police's elite Special Task Force. In addition to the dead, about a dozen prisoners were wounded in the shooting on January 24.

Another demand of the protesters was the repeal of a regulation requiring any government employee posting bail for a prisoner to have a monthly salary of at least 15,000 rupees (\$US134). Many government employees do not meet this condition and thus cannot help prisoners who ask for their assistance. The prisoners were also demanding an end to the harassment of family members and other visitors by prison authorities.

A further protest took place on January 26 when about 50 prisoners demanded the arrest of officers involved in the shootings. After being denied entry to the complex, about 200 relatives of prisoners also staged a protest outside the prison, disrupting traffic on the main Colombo-Anuradhapura road.

Anuradhapura prison, like other Sri Lankan jails, is severely overcrowded. Unbearable conditions and harsh treatment have resulted in strikes and protests in the past. An official investigation has been established into last week's protest, but it will be nothing more than a

cover-up for the government and prison authorities.

The state-run *Daily News* has already sought to justify the shootings. An editorial last week claimed that the protesting prisoners "suddenly started pelting stones at the jailors in an escape bid". Another article claimed that a probe was being conducted into the involvement of "outside hands"—in other words, to find a political scapegoat, possibly among opposition parties.

The overcrowding is a product of the large number of prisoners—around three quarters of the total—held in remand. They are either waiting trial or have been jailed without trial under the country's draconian emergency laws and anti-terrorism legislation.

While not complete, Department of Prisons data shows that the overcrowding for unconvicted prisoners reached a rate of 187.5 percent in 2009—in other words, the jails held nearly twice the number of prisoners for which they were built. At Welikada prison in Colombo, the country's largest, 8 to 9 inmates were locked for 12 hours a day in a cell approximately 10 square metres in size.

The *Sunday Leader* reported that in one area of Welikada prison, prisoners were not allowed to use the toilets overnight after 8.30 p.m. They were given small polythene bags to use as an alternative.

The official 2009 figures, the latest available, show that 35.5 percent of remand prisoners spent more than six months in custody and 9.8 percent spent more than two years. Overall, there were 108,868 unconvicted, as opposed to 37,872 convicted, prisoner admissions island-wide.

Inadequate funding for the country's court system, and thus long waits for trial, has contributed to the number of prisoners on remand and the hardships they face. Many who are ultimately found innocent serve a jail term of months or even years.

With the government intent on slashing the budget deficit, there is also no money available to improve prison conditions or ease overcrowding. The prison budget for 2011 was 3.1 billion rupees—the same as for 2009 despite sharply rising prices.

Tamil detainees held without trial under the Prevention of Terrorism Act have staged several hunger strikes to demand that they be released or have charges filed against them. Many of them have been held in remand for years. Apart from the prisons, there are other military-run detention camps where thousands of Tamil youth have been incarcerated as suspected members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Overwhelmingly, prisoners come from the poorest and most oppressed layers of society. Of the 37,872 convicted prisoners in 2009, 51.1 percent were imprisoned for failing to pay fines. Many were serving a three-month term for not paying a 1,500 rupee (\$US13.50) fine.

In an interview last month with the *International Bridges to Justice* web site, the former Correctional Professional Commissioner of the Prison Department, Lionel Weerasinghe, answered “yes” when asked: “Do you think that violation of human rights occur inside the prisons?” He pointed out that the prisons were operated under an 1898 British law that covered only basic human needs. Weerasinghe said female detainees were the most severely affected.

A report in February 2010 by the Special Rapporteur on Torture for the UN Human Rights Council, Manfred Nowak, stated that Sri Lankan prison guards used illegal corporal punishment, which he said was “corroborated by medical evidence.” He reported that prison guards regularly beat prisoners at Bogambara prison in Kandy. Investors found “instruments that could have no use other than beatings”. He stated that

the beatings happened in front of other prisoners.

Nowak complained that many governments, including in Sri Lanka, only reluctantly allowed him into their countries, suggesting that the real situation was much worse. “Various Governments obstructed my efforts of independent and objective fact finding by extensively preparing detention facilities and instructing detainees about my visit,” he said.

The contempt with which the Sri Lankan government regards basic democratic rights in general is graphically revealed in its treatment of prisoners. Just as death squads operating in collusion with the military have carried out murder and torture with impunity to terrorise Tamils and government opponents, so police and prison authorities have a free hand to enforce their harsh regime and appalling conditions inside jails. On the pretext of cracking down on underworld networks inside prisons, tougher security measures are being adopted.

In the final analysis, the use of police-state methods is being prepared to deal with opposition from working people as the government imposes austerity measures, and living conditions become increasingly intolerable for the masses.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact