

Sri Lankan SEP campaign for release of political prisoners:

Released detainees speak to the WSWS

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka this month launched a campaign demanding the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners held by the regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse. WSWS reporters have held discussions with several recently released detainees and their relatives, who extended their support to the SEP campaign.

After the Sri Lankan civil war ended in 2009 with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), more than a quarter million Tamils were detained in huge military-controlled camps. While most of those detainees have since been “resettled”, another 11,000 young people were arrested by the military as “suspected terrorists” and detained at undisclosed locations.

Of these 11,000, the government claims that about 5,000 have been released, leaving 6,000 in detention camps, where they are being held without trial. None has been charged with any offence, despite being in custody for more than two years.

Another several hundred Tamils, taken into custody on various flimsy allegations related to the island’s 30-year civil war, remain in remand prisons. Some were seized up to a decade ago and many have not been charged.

The detentions have continued even though the government lifted its emergency laws in August to deflect international criticism. Rajapakse introduced new regulations under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), allowing for the continuous incarceration of detainees.

The government claims that detainees are undergoing “rehabilitation”, including job training. The interviews given by the detainees and their families reveal the fraud of this claim and the brutal reality of the conditions inside the detention camps.

The SEP campaign is inseparable from the broader struggle to defend the democratic rights of the working class and rural masses from the attacks of the Rajapakse government. In its statement, “SEP launches campaign to release Sri Lankan political prisoners,” the party warned: “the police-state methods adopted against the Tamil minority will inevitably be used against workers and the rural masses as the government seeks to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of working people” (see: “SEP launches campaign to release Sri

Lankan political prisoners”).

The SEP appeals to workers, youth and intellectuals internationally to issue statements in support of this campaign. The fight to defend democratic rights is inseparably bound up with the struggle to mobilise the working class independently on the basis of socialist policies against the capitalist system.

We publish two interviews below—one from a released detainee and other from a father of a prisoner still held in a detention camp.

WSWS reporters interviewed a 35-year-old man who was released few months ago. His small house consists of an 8-square metre room, a veranda and a tiny kitchen made of planks. He has four young children, but the house has no electricity or running water. To fetch drinking water, family members must walk about 3 kilometres.

“I was dragged to the detention camp by the military on June 15, 2009,” the former detainee explained. “I was told I would be released after six months of job training. I came out after two years without any job training, and empty-handed.

“Before the military took me, I had been incarcerated with my family at the huge military camps known as Manik Farm [near Vavuniya]. In those military-controlled camps there were hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians from the Vanni [northern Sri Lanka].

“All those arrested, including me, were asked to bring a plate, a cup and a blanket. I was detained for one year at Poonthottam, Vavuniya in a small school building.

“There were about 530 prisoners. We were packed in a small area so that sleeping at nights was very difficult. We had to wait in queues to go to the toilets. For more than a year, we were given only rice, dhal and soya meat for three daily meals. The soldiers controlling the camp found fault with us for nothing and would scold us, using filthy words. They would beat us if they were not satisfied for any reason.

“After one year, about 500 of us were taken to the Thirivanomadu forest area in the Batticaloa district [in eastern Sri Lanka]. We were asked to clear the forest and erect huts. It was a dense forest area. We

had to do farming.

“My family stayed at a Manik Farm camp and they could not get permission to visit me. There were no telephone facilities in our camp or theirs. Our letters were checked by the intelligence services before being delivered.

“One person was caught for possession of a mobile phone. He was badly assaulted by officers, who said it was a warning for others. Every morning we had to salute the national flag. In meetings we were told not to undertake any activities against the state and not to join any political party. That is the rehabilitation!

“Once, some youth turned and attacked an army officer, who beat them. Angered, the army arrested seven youth and hanged them up with tied legs and severely tortured them. Later they were taken away, but nobody knows what happened to them.

“The day after my release, I had to register at the police intelligence office in our area. I have to go there every month to sign my name in a book. Although we were released, we are still being monitored.

The released detainee said the war had devastated the lives of families like his. The government had promised to help and provide loans to released detainees, but these were empty promises. He was depending on relatives for assistance.

He also explained the cruel experience of the war. His family had been in a village in northern Kilinochchi district when the Rajapakse regime resumed the war in 2006. Along with other people, they had been forced to move from one area to another, facing indiscriminate military fire. He had seen many people die, including his relatives, and had to abandon them without even burial rituals.

“It is a miracle that my family and myself are alive today. I could not believe how we escaped through that agony,” the former prisoner said.

Speaking about the Manik Farm camps, he said they were in fact prisons, even though the government called them welfare villages. Detainees could not visit other camps, even to see relatives, and lived under the constant threat of the military and police. He added: “We did not have basic facilities. It was like living in a hell.”

Asked about the collapse of the LTTE during the final months of the war, he said it had increasingly lost people’s support. The LTTE leaders had compelled people to help them in the war. But at the same time, the LTTE had looked for the support of the very same international powers that gave all kinds of support to the government.

Commenting on the role of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the former LTTE political front, he said: “After the defeat, the TNA leaders have told us that they are the representatives of the Tamil people. They are doing some political activities. Because there is no other prominent party, people voted for them.”

When WSWs reporters outlined the SEP’s perspective, based on the socialist unity of the Tamil and Sinhala working class in the fight against communal discrimination, he said: “This is the first time I

have heard about socialism and the class struggle, although it seems to be good program. However, I definitely support the campaign to release the political prisoners.”

The WSWs interviewed a 60-year-old man whose son remains detained at Boosa in southern Sri Lanka. The father was living at his sister’s house, which had been devastated by the war. There were no windows or doors, and no furniture. Both his children had been caught up in the war.

“I am a fishing worker,” he explained. “Because of the war, we were displaced and settled down at Poonerin in the Vanni in 2006. The LTTE took away my 18-year-old student son forcibly, without heeding our appeal not to take him. After the war restarted, he escaped and joined us.

“During the war we went from one place to another. I think we stayed at 10 places at least. We were constantly retreating with sticks and tarpaulin pieces to use as a shelter. My daughter was taken by the LTTE for military training in April 2009. We have not seen her since then. I tried to find out about her with the help of the International Committee of Red Cross but without success.

“During the final days of the war, I was hit with a shell and injured my leg and back. I went to Matalan hospital [in the coastal area of Mullaitivu] for treatment. I saw heaps of dead bodies and the agony of the injured. Shells fell at the hospital as well.

“We escaped and were herded into a Manik Farm camp. It was a struggle to live without enough food, other basic needs and sanitary facilities. It was a prison life.”

In the camps, the military had made several announcements, asking people who had had contact with the LTTE to surrender. Those who surrendered would be given six months’ training, while those who evaded the announcement would be caught and imprisoned for 20 years.

Fearing lengthy imprisonment, his son and others had surrendered. In May 2009, his son was taken to the Nelunkulam “rehabilitation camp”. After one year, he was shifted to Boosa camp, accused of having had military training by the LTTE.

The father explained: “We go there once every two months or so. We have no resources to take legal action. There is no political party that helps us. I am fishing, using a hook, but cannot earn enough income.” He added: “It is good that your party is launching this campaign. I will not hesitate to give my full support to it.”



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