Sri Lankan army instigates violence against Jaffna SEP members

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
28 January 2012

On Thursday evening, Sri Lankan soldiers in Jaffna arrested two members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), illegally questioned them and later organised a physical attack on them. The SEP condemns this blatant attack on the democratic rights of the party and its members by state forces deployed by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The entire North and East of the island are under heavy military occupation even though the army crushed the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) more than two years ago. The military has wide powers in these provinces, particularly in the northern Jaffna Peninsula.

The two SEP members—Rasendiran Sudarshan, 41, and Muthulingam Murugananthan, 40—were pasting posters for an SEP public meeting to be held in Jaffna on Sunday. The SEP organised the meeting as part of its campaign to demand the unconditional release of all political prisoners incarcerated by the military in undisclosed detention camps.

Three uniformed soldiers had been watching Sudarshan and Murugananthan as they put up posters near the fish market at Gurunagar on the outskirts of Jaffna town at about 4 p.m. They called out to the SEP members, asking whether the party had obtained permission from the government and the military.

Sudarshan and Murugananthan said police permission was not required for an indoor meeting. Soldiers detained the SEP members, telling them that they had to wait until an officer arrived.

The officer, who came within 10 minutes, began demanding details, including the names of the party's leader and Jaffna organiser. He took down the addresses of Sudarshan and Murugananthan, their phone numbers and the telephone numbers of their contacts in their mobile phones.

While the officer was asking questions, six more soldiers arrived in plain clothes on motorbikes. They wanted to know where the SEP printed its posters and where the money to print the posters came from. They took down details from the national identity cards of the SEP members and photographed them separately.

At about 4.55 p.m., the army officer let Sudarshan and Murugananthan go, saying there were "no problems." He said the only issue was not obtaining police permission. The soldiers tried to put on a good face, but refused to return the seized posters.

All these actions—the arrest of the SEP members, and the taking of details and photographs—are illegal. Yet, as this incident underscores, the security forces flout the law, making a mockery of government claims to have established "civilian rule" in Jaffna.

Sudarshan and Murugananthan left but they were followed on motorbike by the officer and the soldiers—some in front, some behind. The SEP members stopped at a petrol station and saw the army officer phoning someone. As they were leaving, a person suddenly appeared, shouted "adai" [Tamil for "you rascals] and attacked them, with the soldiers looking on. Sudarshan and Murugananthan were knocked from their motorbike but were able to escape without injury.

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The thug could well have been a soldier out of uniform or a member of one of the militias associated with the military.

The Jaffna police only reluctantly accepted a formal complaint by the SEP yesterday. Sudarshan's motorbike was brought to the Jaffna police station yesterday but the police refused to say by whom. The police usually avoid taking any action when the military is involved.

The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, has an unblemished record of opposing the war against the LTTE and defending democratic rights. It has consistently demanded the withdrawal of troops from the North and East, without making any political concessions to the LTTE's separatism.

SEP members in Jaffna have fought for the perspective of socialist internationalism under very difficult conditions of war and now military occupation. That involves the mobilisation of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in a unified struggle for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam that will establish the democratic rights of the Tamil people.

The SEP meeting for which Sudarshan and Murugananthan were campaigning was based on this program. The party is demanding the immediate and unconditional release of thousands of mainly Tamil political prisoners detained without trial as "LTTE suspects" during and after the war.

As a result of its defence of basic democratic rights, the SEP has been a target of the Sri Lankan military and police. During the war, hundreds of people were abducted and killed by pro-government death squads operating in collusion with the military. In March 2007, SEP member Nadarajah Wimaleshwaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan disappeared in Velanai. They were last seen approaching a navy checkpoint.

The government and the military are clearly worried about growing anger among Tamils over the military occupation and terrible living conditions. They are particularly concerned that this discontent is developing in the North, while workers, students and farmers in the South are increasingly engaged in strikes and protests against the government's austerity policies.

The military has intensified its efforts to crack down on protests and other political activities in the North. On January 17, the army prevented members of the People's Struggle Movement, a breakaway faction of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, from travelling to Jaffna to organise a protest over the disappearance of two of its activists.

On January 20, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse dismissed protests in Jaffna over the disappearances and branded the victims as "terrorists." He declared: "These people, carrying photos of persons said to be disappeared, are demanding an inquiry into those who joined an illegal organisation. The armed forces cannot take responsibility for these terrorists."

In the same week, rehabilitation commissioner Major General Chandana Rajaguru warned that the military would arrest any released political prisoners if they joined an organisation that sought to overthrow the government. These comments are a warning that the government will not tolerate any calls to investigate the disappeared or to free political prisoners.

The SEP will intensify its campaign to defend the party and fight for its program, including for the release of political prisoners. The party held a well-attended press conference yesterday to explain what had happened to its members in Jaffna.

The SEP appeals to workers and youth to condemn the army violence against our members and to defend our party. The use of such anti-democratic methods is a warning of the police-state repression that the government and security forces are preparing to use against the working class as a whole as it comes into struggle for its basic rights.

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