

Sri Lankan government releases abducted political activists

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Two leaders of a recently formed Sri Lankan opposition party, Kumar Gunaratnam and Dimuthu Attygala, were released on Tuesday, three days after being abducted by unidentified thugs. Gunaratnam, who holds Australian citizenship, was swiftly deported to that country.

Gunaratnam and Attygala were involved in a breakaway from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) last year, and were about to be named as leaders of a new party, the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

According to the FSP, Gunaratnam was abducted early on Saturday morning while he was alone in a house at Kiribathgoda in the Colombo suburbs. Attygala disappeared on Friday night while she was returning home at Godagama, about 25 kilometres from Colombo. The FSP accused the police or members of the security forces of carrying out the seizures, and blamed the government.

As usual, the police, the security forces and the government immediately denied any role in the abductions. Inspector General of Police N.K. Illangakoon claimed that the police had deployed several teams to investigate the incidents. Foreign Minister G. L. Peiris issued a statement after Gunaratnam's release, saying the disappearances had occurred "with the deliberate intention of causing embarrassment to the government" and it was "grossly unfair to point the finger at the state."

However, secret death squads operating in collusion with the security forces have carried out a growing wave of disappearances, abductions and torture over the past year. At least 56 political activists and journalists have vanished in the past six months, according to opposition parties and human rights organisations.

The death squads, developed during the war against the defeated Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), are being used to suppress political opposition, including to the unpopular austerity measures being implemented by President Mahinda Rajapakse's government, as demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

Speaking to the Sri Lankan and Australian media about his abduction yesterday, Gunaratnam charged that it was carried out by state forces. He said he was handcuffed, blindfolded and tortured during his detention.

Following an intervention by the Australian government, Gunaratnam said his abductors dumped him near a Colombo police station and told him to go there and surrender. This action confirms that those involved had close connections with the police and other state forces. The police then informed the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka, which supervised Gunaratnam's deportation. Gunaratnam had reportedly used a passport with a false name, Noel Mudalige.

Attygala was released shortly afterward. She told the media that her abductors had bundled her into a van and blindfolded her. Later, while being detained, her legs and hands were chained. She added: "They questioned me at length on (the party's) foreign contacts and sources of funding. They took my bank account details. They also asked if we have plans for any military activity."

Attygala said her abductors had repeatedly denied any connection with the government, but they had also questioned her about whether the FSP had contacts with LTTE members. After Gunaratnam's release, she was taken to a location close to her party office and dropped there.

The circumstances surrounding the release of the FSP activists remain unclear. The Australian Foreign Affairs Department had called on Sri Lanka to locate Gunaratnam and ensure his safety, and sections of the Australian media had given prominent coverage to pleas for help by his wife, Champa Somaratna, who lives in Sydney.

Gunaratnam himself praised the Australian government, saying: “I have no doubt that if I did not have the Australian government’s support I would have been killed.” Australia’s High Commissioner personally accompanied him to Sri Lanka’s international airport, escorted by a security contingent.

It seems, however, that a mutually convenient deal was struck between Colombo and Canberra to arrange Gunaratnam’s deportation. After Gunaratnam’s kidnapping was reported in the Australian media, the Australian High Commissioner reportedly requested a meeting with President Rajapakse’s brother Gotabhaya, who is Sri Lanka’s defence secretary. The Australian foreign affairs ministry later thanked “the police and other agencies in Sri Lanka for facilitating the man’s departure.”

At no point did the Australian authorities or the Labor government make any criticism, even veiled, of the Sri Lankan regime, nor mention the rising tide of disappearances in the country. In fact, Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr and his department issued no statements at all, and refused media requests to make any further comment on Gunaratnam’s treatment.

Yet, after his release, Gunaratnam appealed to the “international community”—that is the major powers—to protect human rights in Sri Lanka. In reality, none of these powers, including Australia, has ever upheld the basic legal rights of Sri Lankans. The Australian Labor government supported Rajapakse’s offensive against the LTTE, remained silent about the deaths of thousands of civilians, mass detention of Tamils following the LTTE’s 2009 defeat and continues to work closely with Colombo to seek to block political refugees leaving the island.

Last month, Australia supported a US-sponsored United Nations Human Rights Council resolution urging the Sri Lankan government to implement the recommendations of its own inquiry into human rights violations in the final months of the war against the LTTE. This toothless, non-

binding resolution left the Rajapakse government in charge of addressing its own crimes.

Gunaratnam’s praise for Australia’s role is in line with the opportunist politics of the FSP. It has no fundamental political differences with the JVP and its Sinhala communalism. The JVP stridently backed Rajapakse’s war against the Tamil population, as well as his demands for “sacrifice” from working people to support the war effort. The FSP breakaway reflects the fact that the JVP has become widely discredited among workers and youth.

Gunaratnam was a student member of the JVP in the late 1980s and participated in its chauvinist campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord. JVP thugs killed hundreds of workers and political opponents who refused to support its stance. He later fled the country and obtained citizenship in Australia. Attygala was a member of the JVP since the late 1980s and is now the organiser of the FSP’s Socialist Women Organisation.

The ongoing abductions of political activists and journalists in Sri Lanka must be a further sharp warning to the working class and poor of the methods that this government will increasingly use to silence and intimidate the rising opposition to its austerity measures.



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