

Sri Lankan government detains human rights activists under anti-terror law

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During the past week, Sri Lankan police arrested human rights campaigners who were demanding the release of Tamil youth detained in military custody since the end of the government's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009.

The arrests indicate that President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is making a renewed attack on those who are exposing its war crimes and human rights abuses, while fabricating claims of a revival of LTTE activity.

* Last Thursday, police arrested a Tamil widow, Balendran Jeyakumari, and her 13-year-old daughter Vibhooshika, at the village of Dharmapuram in northern Kilinochchi on trumped-up allegations of "harbouring an ex-LTTE" cadre. Hundreds of army soldiers and police cordoned off the area around her home, claiming they were searching for a "terrorist."

After the police terrorist investigation division (TID) questioned the mother and her daughter all night, the government detained Jeyakumari at the Boosa prison camp in the south of the island, under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Jeyakumari's daughter was placed under the control of the Child Protection Bureau—effectively also detained.

The PTA allows the defence secretary to detain people for up to 18 months without trial. Any "confessions" extracted from detainees can be used against them. Hundreds of Tamil political prisoners have been detained for years at Boosa as "LTTE suspects", without charge or trial.

Jeyakumari's only "offence" has been to campaign for the release of her 15-year-old son, who surrendered to the army in May 2009.

* Last Sunday evening, the TID arrested Ruky Fernando of INFORM, a human rights group, and a

Catholic priest, Praveen Mahesan, from the Peace and Reconciliation Center in Kilinochchi. They had sought to investigate the circumstances of the arrest of Jeyakumari and her daughter.

Police spokesman Superintendent Ajith Rohana claimed: "The two suspects were arrested under provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act for trying to cause communal disharmony and disturbance." He did not explain how investigating the detention of Jeyakumari and her daughter would "cause communal disharmony and disturbance."

The police claimed that a TID team investigating the distribution of handbills in the north traced an ex-LTTE cadre named Gobi, who escaped from a Vavuniya detention camp at the end of war. The police alleged that he was hiding in Jeyakumari's house, but fled and shot at an unnamed police officer when police tried to arrest him.

The military also claimed to have found a metal detector in the house. Hundreds of soldiers and police cordoned off the area supposedly to apprehend the ex-LTTE cadre, but did not find him. Police and army spokesmen did not explain how such an escape could occur when military, police and intelligence personnel were watching every nook and cranny.

Likewise, the military claims that "Gobi" escaped nearly five years ago from a heavily-guarded military-run detention centre, which is cordoned off and fenced with barbed wire. Hundreds of thousands of Tamil people were detained there for years, before eventually being "resettled" without any basic facilities.

The entire story smacks of a drama staged by the military. Jeyakumari's lawyer rejected the police claim. Several similar arrests of Tamils have been reported from the north and east.

It is routine for the government and the security

establishment to fabricate such allegations, hysterically publicised by the pliant media, as a pretext for crackdowns on working people and political opponents, branding them “terrorists.” In the north, the government uses such cases to suppress opposition to the ongoing military occupation of the region.

Jeyakumari’s first son was shot dead while he was coming from school during the war. Her second son was killed in a military attack during the final days of the war. Her third son surrendered to the army, after earlier being conscripted by the LTTE. She has participated in many protest campaigns demanding the release of political prisoners and information about those who have disappeared.

The government has renewed its crackdown as it faces a US-sponsored resolution this month in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) over the killings, war crimes and other abuses committed by the government and the military during the last months of the war. A UN expert panel has estimated that about 40,000 civilians were killed during the final military offensives.

Rajapakse’s government is attempting to demonstrate that remnants of the LTTE still function in the north, in effect answering the charges in the UNHRC by unleashing a wave of arrests of supposed “terrorists.” The government is also sending a message to the working class that it will not tolerate any exposure of its war crimes, or opposition to its austerity measures and attacks on basic democratic rights.

At the same time, the US is preparing its resolution with the backing of its international allies, not in order to defend Tamil people or democratic rights. Washington is putting mounting pressure on Rajapakse to distance his regime from China. This is part of the Obama administration’s broader “pivot to Asia” aimed at diplomatically isolating and militarily encircling China.

Likewise, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents the Tamil capitalist elite, is exploiting the latest arrests to appeal to the US and other major powers to support its push for a devolution of powers to the north and east. Several TNA leaders are currently in Geneva lobbying for the US-sponsored resolution, showing their readiness to back Washington’s strategic interests in order to achieve their own reactionary power-sharing objectives in Sri Lanka.

The Rajapakse government’s repression is not confined to Tamils. Amid a deteriorating economic situation, it is conducting similar military-police crackdowns on working people in the south. In fact, the government is utilising, against the struggles of the working class, all the police-state measures built up during the 26-year civil war. In the latest instance, the police last Sunday brutally attacked and arrested 60 people when hundreds of villagers demonstrated against groundwater pollution caused by a rubber gloves factory at Hanwella in the Colombo district.



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