Australia: Rejected Tamil asylum seeker sets himself on fire

Will Morrow
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In another tragic consequence of the Australian government's reactionary anti-refugee regime, a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee attempted to kill himself last Wednesday after his application for refugee status was rejected, opening the way for his imminent deportation.

The young man, whose first name is Janarthanan, reportedly remains in an induced coma in a critical condition at Sydney's Concord Hospital, suffering burns over 98 percent of his body, and severe burns over 70 percent. Doctors have carried out multiple skin grafts.

The day before he set himself alight, Janarthanan reportedly received a letter from the Refugee Review Tribunal, notifying him that his appeal had been dismissed against an earlier decision refusing him refugee status.

Janarthanan, who is in his 20s, arrived in Australia in June 2012 and was detained for more than three months before being released on a "bridging" visa. He then worked as an office cleaner. More than 20,000 refugees live in Australia on such temporary visas. Under measures introduced by the previous Labor government, those who arrived after August 2012 have no right to work, leaving them dependent on charities.

A friend of Janarthanan, Balasingham Prabhakaran, described the situation that led to his desperate act. "He told me he had a genuine fear about being sent back to Sri Lanka," Prabhakaran told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "He was very disillusioned after getting the letter on Tuesday… Apparently he swallowed petrol before pouring it on himself. A number of workers from a nearby shipyard came to his aid, pouring water on him and trying to put out the flames."

Janarthanan's attempted suicide is a direct result of the drive by the current Liberal-National Coalition government and its Labor predecessor to block all refugees from getting to Australia. Both governments have perpetrated the lie that Tamil asylum seekers are not "genuine refugees" and face no repression at the hands of the authoritarian Sri Lankan regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Last November, Prime Minister Tony Abbott spoke at a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka, praising the Rajapakse regime and the supposed "freedom" and "prosperity" in the country. Abbott defended the Colombo government's use of torture, declaring that "we accept that sometimes in difficult circumstances difficult things happen" (see: "Australian PM defends torture, hails Sri Lankan regime").

Colombo's military victory of the government over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009—which involved the deaths of an estimated 40,000 civilians, according to the UN—has only seen the vicious methods used against Tamils extended to the working class more broadly. The country remains the scene of forced abductions, torture and assassinations of political opponents and journalists.

This repression, combined with crushing poverty, has caused people to try to escape to Australia and other countries (see: "Sri Lankan correspondent explains why refugees are fleeing to Australia"). Often, refugees take out large loans at high interest rates, and sell their homes and valuables, in order to pay for their journey.

Refugees deported to Sri Lanka are arrested for illegally seeking to escape the country. According to a report released last month by the Australian Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC), "illegal migration" carries with it a prison sentence of one to five years, and a fine of 50,000 to 200,000 rupees.

Janarthanan's self-immolation follows a wave of

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similar desperate acts by Tamil refugees detained in Australia. These include:

· October 2011, a refugee detained for two years at the Villawood detention centre killed himself.

· October 2012, a 42-year-old refugee attempted suicide after being informed he would be deported to Sri Lanka.

· January 2013, a refugee with a wife and daughter in Sri Lanka awaiting the outcome of his refugee status died in Fremantle hospital after his second attempt to commit suicide.

· October 2013, a 37-year-old man detained in Melbourne, Victoria, attempted to hang himself.

As Labor did before it, the Abbott government is intimately collaborating with the Sri Lankan government in blocking refugees from reaching Australia. Australian security forces are training Sri Lankan personnel to intercept refugee boats, as well as providing intelligence. Last November, in a decision lauded by the Labor's ex-foreign minister Bob Carr, Abbott announced a gift to the Rajapakse government of two naval patrol boats to intercept asylum seekers.

Since January 2012, about 8,300 Sri Lankan refugees have arrived in Australia. The Sri Lankan authorities claim to have intercepted another 4,500. Since October 2012, at least 1,100 have been forcibly returned to Sri Lanka, many under the Labor government.

Last September, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison declared that the government would escalate this operation "to ensure that people who may seek to come from Sri Lanka would be intercepted outside of our sea border and returned directly, and all of them."

Sri Lankan refugees are subjected to an arbitrary "enhanced screening" process, preventing them from even applying for asylum in Australia. The HLRC report stated: "The decision to 'screen out' and return an asylum seeker to Sri Lanka is not subject to independent oversight or review. The process also involves interviewing recent arrivals without providing them access to legal advice and or information about their rights."

The official response to Janarthanan's attempted suicide was cynical and contemptuous. Immigration Minister Morrison's spokesman said it was a "deeply distressing incident" and claimed the government would "ensure the proper care and support of this young man, in partnership with the Sri Lankan High Commission."

In reality, this tragedy flows from a deliberate policy of blocking refugees from exercising their basic legal and democratic right to claim asylum. This brutal policy, directed against one of the most vulnerable sections of the international working class, is also setting precedents for the use of repressive methods against working people in Australia as economic and social conditions deteriorate.

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