

Sri Lankan government deports asylum-seekers

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The Sri Lankan government has begun forcibly deporting Pakistan and Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees in violation of international law and basic democratic rights. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 108 Pakistanis, including 11 women and 8 children, were deported between August 1 and 14.

The UNHCR has condemned the deportations, declaring that the Colombo government was “in breach of its obligations under international law concerning the principle of no-forced-returns.” While the expulsions were temporarily halted by an August 15 court order, the government is determined to continue its deportation of asylum-seekers.

Currently there are almost 1,800 refugees and asylum seekers, including Pakistanis, Afghans, Iranians and Palestinians, in Sri Lanka. The majority are from Pakistan, including about 1,500 Christians and members of the Ahmadiya and Shia Muslim religious sects. Hundreds have been rounded up by the police and detained on government orders. The Sri Lankan government is now employing the police-state measures developed in the war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against the asylum seekers.

Some of the refugees were living under police surveillance in Negombo coastal area north of Colombo and dependent on donations from international non-government organisations and charity groups. But last week the government decided to send all remaining asylum seekers to detention centres.

A fundamental rights affidavit submitted by six Sri Lankan human rights activists states that 240 asylum seekers, including a minor, have been arrested and detained. Some of these are being held at the Boosa detention centre, which is controlled by notorious

police Terrorist Investigation Department. Others are incarcerated in the Mirihana police detention camp near Colombo.

Some of the asylum seekers allege that they were tortured for refusing to cooperate with government authorities. Those arrested were not brought before a magistrate or given any reason for their detention. They were denied access to lawyers. UNHCR officials have also been prevented from visiting the detainees.

The fundamental rights affidavit states that some of those detained are “old and sick people,” including a dengue patient, someone who has had by-pass surgery and others with various medical problems. All of the detainees are Pakistani and Afghanistan nationals registered with UNHCR and “have well-founded fear of persecution.” The two court cases for a writ and fundamental rights were to be heard on August 29 and September 29 respectively.

Human rights lawyer Lakshan Dias, who is representing the asylum seekers, told the WWS: “It is not clear under which law they have been arrested and detained. No one knows that they were arrested and detained by whom, and under which law.”

WWS reporters met with some of the asylum seekers at Negombo’s Saint Sebastian Church where 25 male Pakistani Christians are staying in poor conditions and without basic facilities. The wives and children of the men are being accommodated in rented homes near the church. All are from Pakistan’s Punjab province.

Under Pakistan’s so-called blasphemy laws, those not following the Islamic faith can be jailed for life or face the death penalty. One detainee explained: “Christians are subjected to religious discrimination there. We are isolated because of our religious beliefs. Under Islamic law it is a punishable offence [to follow another faith]

and so we can't return to Pakistan. If we do the authorities will kill us."

An engineer who arrived in Sri Lanka in 2011 said: "We can't live in Pakistan. You only hear about US attacks in Afghanistan and on the Pakistan borders but inside Pakistan itself there are lots of attacks against Christians and other religious sects. The Punjab governor supports those attackers and there is no kind of law and justice there. Last year they killed nearly three hundred people in bomb blasts in All Saints Church of Peshawar and another attack in Lahore."

A young man explained his difficulties: "I came here last October with my spouse and we now have a four-month-old baby. My baby is now a Sri Lankan. We sold all our gold jewellery and furniture to come here but now don't have money to live. The priest of the church helps us. If we'd had money we would have travelled to another country like Canada.

"The UNHCR accepted our appeal for asylum and gave us documents but the Sri Lankan government refused these, saying it is illegal to stay here without a visa. My wife was injured when she jumped from a wall when the immigration officers came."

The plight of the asylum seekers exposes the blatant lies of the Sri Lankan ministry of external affairs. It insists that the deportations are justified because the asylum seekers are "victims of commercially-driven human trafficking networks" and a threat to the "security interests of Sri Lanka and the region."

In June the government withdrew "on arrival" visa facilities for Pakistanis, following chauvinist campaigns by Buddhist extremist groups, such as Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), who falsely claim that Muslim refugees are a security risk.

The government's brutal treatment of Pakistani and Afghan refugees is also being imposed on Sri Lankan asylum seekers. Hundreds of Sri Lankans, mainly Tamils, who have tried to flee the country, have been arrested by the navy. Forty-one Sri Lankan asylum seekers attempting to enter Australia were recently deported from that country, handed over to the Sri Lankan navy and are currently detained.

The Sri Lankan working class must oppose the forcible deportation of asylum seekers and mobilise to defend their basic democratic rights, including the universal right of all people to work and live in any country of their choice.



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