

Tamil political prisoners in Sri Lanka launch hunger strike

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Sri Lankan Tamil political detainees commenced a hunger strike on Monday and have vowed to fast until death to demand their immediate release. Protests and fasting have also been organised in Colombo, Vavuniya and Jaffna in support of the prisoners.

Around 223 detainees are participating in the campaign inside 14 prisons around the island, including Magazine and Welikada prisons in Colombo and in other places such as Negambo, Monaragala, Anuradhapura, Pollonnaruwa, Batticaloa, Badulla and Kandy. The physical condition of several detainees is deteriorating.

Some detainees have pleaded to be allowed to spend what is left of their lives with their loved ones. A number have been in jail for 10, 15 and 20 years without charge. They are held as “terrorist suspects” for allegedly belonging to the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). Arbitrary arrest and detention based on false accusations is part of systematic communal discrimination against the island’s Tamil minority.

The LTTE was militarily defeated in May 2009 in a series of ruthless military offensives carried out by the government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, in which an estimated 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed, according to a UN report.

The prisoners are held under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which allows for detention for 18 months in police custody without the suspect being brought before the courts. The PTA allows for so-called confessions to be used in court to extend the imprisonment. The police are notorious for using torture to extract such confessions.

According to government figures, there are 273 Tamil prisoners, including 10 women. Only 54 have been imprisoned after court cases, 60 have been detained

without charge and the remaining 159 are involved in court proceedings that have dragged out for months and years. Even as late as last year, five years after the LTTE’s defeat, “terrorist suspects” were being arrested and detained.

A recently-released report by the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights noted repeated allegations that the security forces were running secret detention camps and called for their investigation.

In one case two innocent Tamil women were released by the courts, one after 15 years in detention and the other after seven years. On Tuesday, the Colombo magistrates’ court took two separate cases involving 24 political prisoners, including two women. They had been detained for nearly 15 months without charge. The magistrate sent a request to the attorney general to press charges or release them.

Leaders of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and other Tamil organisations have been at pains to try to convince detainees to halt their protests while at the same time calling for their release. Almost all Tamil organisations are backing the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

So-called National Dialogue minister Mano Ganeshan rushed to the Magazine prison this week to tell the protestors that he would discuss their release with Sirisena. However, prisoners insisted that they would not halt their hunger strike until the president assured their release.

Some TNA leaders are requesting a general amnesty for detainees. After visiting the Anuradhapura prison, TNA parliamentarian M. Sumanthiran declared that “as agreed by the government, all political prisoners must be released.” However, there is no declared agreement to release political prisoners.

This is not the first time the detainees have held hunger strikes and protests demanding they be released or charged without delay. Tamil party leaders, bringing promises from successive governments, managed to halt protests in the past.

Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakse repeated his claim this week that “there are no political prisoners in the country’s prisons.” When he visited the prisons he was confronted by the detainees and Rajapakse denied making this statement. However, cabinet spokesman Rajitha Seneratne reiterated the same position at a press briefing on Wednesday.

In a bid to dampen anger over the detentions, Senaratne said those for whom there was no prima facie case would be released and the trial of others would be expedited. Sirisena called on authorities to submit a report to consider the next step.

For all its democratic posturing, the real face of the government is its mobilisation of a large contingent of police, including the riot squad and a water cannon, to block a protest march of about 100 people, many of them relatives of the prisoners. Police allowed only eight people to hand over a petition to the president.

Rajamani, 63, a mother of one of the detainees, angrily said: “We went but the president was not there. If we want to meet him we have to wait till next election... Already our children are starving. If they die, it is a heavy loss for us. We voted for this government to save us. We need nothing except our children.” She had travelled from Matale in the Central Province.

Imaanuvel, 53, from Vavuniya, has been detained since February 2009. His wife Looordamma and two daughters were at the protest. Looordamma and their daughter, Luthini, had been arrested in 2009 when intelligence officers came to their home and found Imaanuel was not there. He was detained when he went to the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission office in Vavuniya to hand over a letter, after which the two women were released without charge.

“My father was detained for years in Colombo and now at Anuradhapura. I have two sisters and no men in our family. I abandoned my studies and have had to work for seven years in shops and now in a garment factory for just 10,000 rupees a month,” Luthini said.

Sasidaran Thangamalar, 53, was arrested on suspicion of renting a house to alleged “terrorists.” Her daughter Jadhisini said: “They arrested me and my mother last

year. I was detained for criminal investigation in Colombo then Boossa prison for one and half months.” Jadhisini has no financial support and has had to end her studies.

Thiyagaraja Rames, 28, from Puthukudiyurppy, who is the father of two children, was arrested from the welfare camp at Vavuniya. He was released after two years of “rehabilitation,” but was arrested again last year and is now in Magazine prison. His wife was at the protest.

Nine young men from a tea estate in Raththota in Matale district were arrested in 2008. Their wives and mothers took part in the protest. The wife of Visvanathan Kamaleswaran, who was arrested after just a few months of their marriage, explained: “A few people came at night and took my husband. They said they are taking him to repair a TV and that he would be back in the morning. However, he was detained [as an LTTE suspect].”

She and other relatives of the detainees met with former Minister Arumugam Thondaman, the leader of the plantation-based Ceylon Workers Congress, which is notorious for betraying the struggles of workers. He callously declared that “those who committed crimes must face the punishment.”

The protest march was called by the Movement of Equal Rights, a group organised by the Front Line Socialist Party (FSP), which is a breakaway faction of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The FSP is exploiting the anger of the relatives of political prisoners to posture as defenders of the rights of Tamils. However, top FSP figures were in the leadership of the JVP, which supported the communal war to the hilt and defended all the military’s atrocities and abuses of democratic rights.



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