

Sri Lankan protests demand release of Tamil political prisoners

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People in Sri Lanka's north and east joined a hartal—a general shutdown—last Friday to demand the immediate release of Tamil-speaking political prisoners.

The shutdown was total in the Northern Province. All shops, private and government institutions, schools and universities closed, and transport ground to a halt. Hundreds of police and military intelligence officers were deployed. Special Task Force police squads patrolled in Jaffna to prevent protest demonstrations. At Chavakachcheri near Jaffna, police arrested two people distributing leaflets calling for the shutdown.

In the east, Tamils in the Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara districts took part in the agitation. In Ampara, police and soldiers attempted to reopen the closed shops.

The protest coincided with a fasting campaign by more than 180 detainees from 14 prisons throughout the island that started on November 10. On Monday, it was reported that six of those who are fasting are in critical condition and refusing medical treatment.

Yesterday morning, the detainees halted their hunger strike after the government made a fresh proposal to “release” them to “rehabilitation camps”—detention centres focussed on reeducation or brainwashing.

The prisoners have been detained for 8 to 20 years as suspected supporters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was militarily defeated in May 2009. Arrested under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and Emergency Regulations, many of them have never been charged in court.

The hartal protest and the fasting are a demonstration of the anger building among Tamil people against the pro-US government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who “promised” to release the Tamil prisoners but have failed to do so.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main party of the Tamil elite, and the Tamil National People's Front (TNPFF), another communal group, called Friday's protest to try to dissipate the growing opposition to the government, and to cover up their own role in lining up with the government and its US backers.

This fast is the second in recent months. On October 12, the political prisoners started a fast, which they stopped on October 17, after the intervention of the TNA and Tamil ministers in the government. TNA leader R. Sambandan and National Dialogue Minister Mano Ganeshan carried messages from Sirisena and Wickremesinghe urging them to stop the fasting and pledging to “sympathetically” consider their cases and “release” them before Diwali, a Hindu festival, on November 10.

On October 27, however, the government ruled out any amnesty for the detainees and decided to consider granting them bail instead. The decision was taken at a meeting held by Wickremesinghe with senior officials, including Inspector General of Police N.K. Ilangakoon, with Ganeshan's participation.

The government bailed out just 31 prisoners, including three women, on November 11. A magistrate in Colombo imposed extremely harsh bail conditions, including two sureties each worth one million rupees (over \$US7,000). The detainees' passports were impounded and they were ordered to report to the police Terrorist Investigation Division in Colombo or Vavuniya once every two weeks. Their cases will be heard again on January 16. Another 8 prisoners were released on Monday under similar conditions.

Facing continued criticism by ordinary Tamils, a TNA leader, Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran, met Sirisena last week to

seek the release of prisoners. The president gave no direct reply. Wigneswaran covered up for Sirisena, saying he intended to release detainees, but “political interventions” were preventing him.

This was another ruse to block the release of the political prisoners. Sirisena is satisfying his Sinhala communalist constituency. Champika Ranawaka, a government minister and leader of Sinhala chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya, told the parliament last month that the Tamils arrested during the anti-LTTE war were not political prisoners. “They are LTTE members and I strongly oppose releasing them,” he added.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe are on record saying that “there are no political prisoners in the country’s prisons.” These prisoners were taken into custody as “LTTE suspects.” The government is making a sinister attempt to brand them as common criminals, denying their political rights.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s refusal to free the detainees again demonstrates its communal and anti-democratic nature, as well as the TNA’s complicity in the government’s installation.

The TNA actively supported the US-sponsored regime-change operation in January to oust President Mahinda Rajapakse and replace him with one of his ministers, Sirisena, on the pretext of establishing good governance. Like the government itself, the TNA backs Washington’s aggressive “pivot to Asia” against China.

In return, the TNA is seeking US and Western support for a power-sharing deal with Colombo. Last month, the TNA coordinated with Washington to bring forward a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to assist the Sri Lankan government cover up the war crimes committed by the military during the war.

During the hartal, people in Jaffna spoke to WSWS reporters, expressing hostility toward the government and Tamil leaders.

One transport worker said: “This is not a democratic government. The police attacked and detained people who protested against the rape and murder of a school girl. Many were arrested and they are under bail conditions. The TNA is working with this government. The mistake we have made is voting for the TNA. If this is a democratic government, it has to release the

detainees immediately.”

A youth commented: “The US brought the [UNHRC] war crimes resolution for its interests. We were trapped in the war zone [during the war between the Colombo military and the LTTE]. We believe that the no-fire zones were attacked with the support of the US. How can the US support an inquiry on war crimes? We participated in the hartal to demand the release of the detainees, not to support the TNA.”

Another person said: “Sirisena won the election with votes of Tamil and Muslim people. But now he is working with the chauvinist forces. That’s why he is reluctant to release the detainees. The TNA is coordinating with the government but it is incapable of solving this problem.” He said the struggle to release the detainees must continue. “What you said about the war crimes is correct. The US and India are intervening in the issues of Tamils in their own interests. They use the tragedy of Tamil people. It is useless to believe that these political parties will go against these powers. We need a new policy.”



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