

Sri Lankan regime, Tamil nationalists reject ex-LTTE members' poisoning allegations

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The Tamil National Alliance's (TNA) handling of former Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters' allegations of poisoning nearly two months ago illustrates their close collaboration with the US-backed regime of President Maithripala Sirisena in Sri Lanka.

Former LTTE members have accused the Sri Lankan military of poisoning them during their captivity in detention centres after the end of the civil war in 2009. Last month, a number of them testified to the state-appointed Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM) inquiry, alleging that they were deceptively injected with unidentified substances. They said they were told they were receiving vaccines against viral infections including AIDS, though there is currently no AIDS vaccine.

They also alleged food poisoning, noting that the soldiers guarding them did not eat the same food. In the past years, 107 have died due to unspecified illnesses; some were diagnosed with cancer.

There is growing popular dismay over these allegations. Hundreds of thousands of people were interned in detention camps after the army massacred the LTTE in 2009, and the ex-LTTE fighters were largely drawn from impoverished layers of farmers, fishermen and labourers. However, the Sri Lankan government has rejected the allegations, refusing to investigate or provide medical aid.

Former Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said, "How many have died? Is this allegation logical? Why should we poison 100 people or whatever they are alleging that we are doing to them? Is there any logic in this allegation?"

The TNA has, for its part, completely changed its line on the poisoning allegations since they first emerged publicly. At that time, the TNA made noisy statements

demanding "international inquiries" into the treatment of the LTTE fighters and pledged to obtain medical aid.

Two weeks ago, TNA second-in-command, Sumanthiran, rejected the allegations and supported the government's denials that it was responsible. He said, "We couldn't find any witnesses to confirm that former LTTE members received lethal injections. It was reported that more than 100 people lost their lives due to lethal injections, but we were not able to identify even five."

Sampanthan, the leader of the TNA, has refused make any further comments on the allegations.

TNA's denials are part of its joint effort with the government to whitewash war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan army—with the backing of the United States, India, China, and the other major powers—at the end of the civil war. This collaboration is bound up with the complete subordination of the TNA to US imperialism's strategy of using Sri Lanka as a base, policed by the Sirisena regime, for its "pivot to Asia" preparations for war with China.

On August 9, amid growing popular anger, the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) passed a resolution calling for foreign doctors to examine the ex-LTTE fighters. This was an implicit acknowledgment that, amid the military occupation of the North and continuing "white van" abductions, doctors from the area might be afraid to issue a diagnosis that incriminated the army. The Sirisena regime rejected the resolution, however, advising the NPC to have Northern Province doctors perform the examinations.

The Tamil nationalists' goal in passing this resolution was not to aid the ex-LTTE fighters, however, but to promote their collaboration with Washington and its war plans in Asia. NPC Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran hailed the recent US-led joint military

operation with the Sri Lankan military in Jaffna as a humanitarian mission, requesting that accompanying US doctors examine the victims.

The US doctors refused to examine the victims, however. Later on, the US embassy in Colombo claimed the doctors were not equipped with necessary medical instruments.

Hospitals in the Northern Province duly organised special clinics for examinations. Plain-clothes military and intelligence personnel were posted in the hospitals to monitor the examinations and threaten those who turned up.

Unsurprisingly, only 96 of the 12,000 ex-LTTE fighters turned up in the first three weeks of September. Most of the victims distrusted the NPC-organised examinations and were afraid of providing their medical records.

While Wigneswaran questioned the posting of security forces to the hospitals, the plain fact is that the Tamil nationalist politicians rely on the very same security forces for protection at their own public meetings, as anger mounts over their anti-democratic and anti-worker policies.

US imperialism, as well as the other Western powers, India, and China are all deeply implicated in the war crimes committed in Sri Lanka. They supported the offensive under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa diplomatically and militarily, and praised the setting up of the “rehabilitation” centres. Some diplomats reportedly even visited the detention centres in 2009.

The “rehabilitation” centres enforced arbitrary military detention under the notorious “Prevention of Terrorism Act”. Detainees were denied fundamental rights and confined without charge, trial, or access to legal consultation to challenge their detention. The International Bar Association issued a statement in 2015, declaring, “detainees are often interrogated in order to extract confessions and gain information on wider social and political Tamil networks. Around a quarter of interviewees experienced torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.”

Sarath Fonseka, who led the war in 2009, as the Commander of the Sri Lankan Army, has not yet made any statements denying the poisoning allegations. He was promoted by Sirisena in March 2015 as the first Field Marshal in Sri Lankan history. In February 2016, Sirisena made him minister of regional development.

Given the record of the Sri Lankan government and military, the poisoning allegations are credible. During the insurrection of the JVP in the late 1980s, thousands of Sinhala youth were massacred and thousands more “disappeared” in military custody. The government recently acknowledged that the “disappeared” had been killed, agreeing to issue a “certificate of absence” to relatives of over 65,000 Sinhalese and Tamils who have been missing for 30 years.

In September 2011, Rajapaksa staged a ceremony in the presidential “Temple Tree” residence to release the first group of 1,800 “rehabilitated” inmates. He issued “certificates” for the “successful completion of rehabilitation” and—in the presence of US Ambassador Patricia Butenis, Indian High Commissioner Ashok Kantha and British High Commissioner John Rankin—handed over “rehabilitated” ex-LTTE cadres to their families.

In 2014, Butenis praised the Rajapaksa regime, declaring, “The government has also made great progress with the rehabilitation of ex-combatants.”



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