

Australia: Biloela residents maintain three-year fight for Tamil refugee family's freedom

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March 5 was the third anniversary of the arrest and imprisonment of a Tamil refugee family in the central Queensland town of Biloela. It also marked three years of a non-stop fight for their freedom waged by the residents of the town, through their campaign “Home to Bilo.”

To mark the anniversary, vigils were organised in cities and towns across Australia, demonstrating the wide support for the asylum seekers. In Biloela, the vigil was held at 5 a.m., marking the same time, in 2018, that armed guards and local police stormed the home of Nadesalingam (Nades) and Priya, the husband and wife, and their two daughters, Kopika and Tharunicaa.

Similar events were held in all the capital cities—Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart and Darwin. They were also conducted in regional centres, including Bundaberg in Queensland, Warrnambool in Victoria, and Newcastle, Port Macquarie, Armidale and Moruya in New South Wales. Altogether, they drew hundreds of people from around the country.

Significantly, a dusk vigil was held on Christmas Island, an Australian-controlled territory in the Indian Ocean, where the family has been imprisoned since September 2019.

The campaign is demanding that Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and Immigration Minister Alex Hawke use their ministerial powers to intervene, release the family and bring them home to Biloela, where they lived for more than four years before their arrest.

Biloela is close to coal mining operations and has a large abattoir that employs numbers of immigrants and refugees, and where Nades previously worked. The stand taken by the working-class people and

professionals of this town, as well as the support won for this campaign across the country, exposes the myth of popular support for the literal war on refugees conducted by successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor Party, since the 1990s.

Angela Fredericks, one of the campaign leaders, told the media: “They’ve essentially spent three years behind bars for committing no crime.” Speaking on the trauma inflicted on the family, Fredericks said their lives have “been destroyed just in terms of the amount of stress that has been put on that family.”

Fredericks commented on the widespread support for the family. The campaign “may have started here in Biloela,” she said, but the family has won “love and support” right across Australia. “They’ve gone to Melbourne, Perth, Darwin and now Christmas Island. It doesn’t matter where they’ve gone, that connection, and that fight in Biloela, has still stayed strong.”

The government’s raid on the family was carried out by the para-military Australian Border Force. It would never have come to light except for the campaign instigated by Biloela residents. The raid was deliberately conducted in the early hours of the morning with the aim of quickly deporting the family to Sri Lanka.

If deported, they would be immediately turned over to the Sri Lankan police Criminal Investigation Department. It has a long-documented history of torturing and imprisoning Tamil refugees, especially those with alleged ties the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which Nades said he joined in 2001.

The government and immigration department have maintained that the family is not entitled to any sort of protection visa. Under the “border protection” policy reinforced by the last Labor government, any asylum seekers who arrive by boat are denied the right to

asylum and forbidden from ever settling in the country.

This regime has been upheld by the High Court, Australia's supreme court. Last month, however, the full bench of the Federal Court rejected the government's appeal against an earlier ruling by Justice Mark Moshinsky that the youngest daughter Tharunicaa had been denied procedural fairness. Moshinsky branded the treatment of the family "Kafkaesque," referring to novelist Franz Kafka's depiction of prisoners thrown into legal limbo.

The "Home to Bilo" campaign has drawn national attention. Residents from Biloela have been interviewed on television and radio. They have raised thousands of dollars in donations for the family's legal battle. Some celebrities, media figures and politicians have joined the calls for the family's release.

In Sydney, Labor Senator Kristina Keneally spoke at the vigil, asserting that the family had support from right-wing figures, including radio host Alan Jones and former Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Keneally declared: "It seems to me the only three people in Australia who are unmoved are Peter Dutton, Scott Morrison and Alex Hawke."

Keneally has claimed to defend the family since 2019, but the Labor Party has helped create and maintain the anti-refugee laws. Keneally herself has criticised the Coalition government from the right, accusing it of "losing control" of the borders.

When Dutton went to Sri Lanka in 2019 to reinforce the military operation to stop refugees reaching Australia, the government temporarily halted aerial patrols to hunt refugee boats. Keneally denounced this on Twitter, writing: "Mr Dutton needs to explain why he stopped these crucial border patrols."

Moreover, it was the Gillard Labor government that, in 2012, declared that all asylum seekers from Sri Lanka who arrived by boat would be forcibly repatriated. This followed an agreement made with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, which resulted in 700 deportations.

The brutal treatment of this family typifies the horrors inflicted on refugees by the political elites internationally. The answer is not to appeal to the very political parties responsible for this nightmare. The orientation must be to the working class, and the fight for the basic right for working people to live and work wherever they choose around the world, as part of a

common struggle against the capitalist profit system that maintains the national borders.



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