

Tragic death of young Sri Lankan woman exposes horrific conditions in Japanese detention centres

Dehin Wasantha
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Wishma Sandamali Ratnayake, a young Sri Lankan migrant worker, died on March 6 at Nagoya Local Emigrant Service Bureau in Japan's Aichi Prefecture. She was just 33 years old.

Sandamali, a former resident of Imbulgoda in Kadawatha, a Colombo suburb, had passed her Advanced Level exam in Sri Lanka and entered Japan in 2017 on a student visa.

Rather than continue on to higher education in Japan, she hoped to find a well-paid job. Those on student visas in Japan, however, are only able to work 28 hours a week, and so she found it difficult to secure permanent employment.

Sandamali began learning Japanese at an education institute but dropped out, unable to pay the tuition fees, and then confronted a range of difficulties.

Last August she attempted to lodge a complaint with police, because she was being harassed by a young man she was living with. Police ignored Sandamali's complaint and, instead, arrested and then jailed her at the Nagoya detention camp for overstaying her visa.

Unable to pay for her return to Sri Lanka, she was treated like a criminal and held in brutal conditions for seven months, including being confined to a tiny room.

Sandamali expected immigration authorities to provide her with the necessary security but she received no assistance. According to START official, Yasunori Matsui, she became ill in December and was vomiting blood and unable to walk by January. START is a support group that provides aid to foreign labourers and refugees.

Sandamali, who lost about 20 kilograms, became so weakened that she could only be moved by wheelchair and was too unwell to be returned to Sri Lanka.

Immigration authorities rejected her application for refugee status and ignored requests by Japanese aid providers that she be given temporary freedom in order to secure medical treatment.

Ridma Ratnayake, Sandamali's younger sister, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* from Tokyo last week.

Ridma said that more than 200 Japanese nationals paid their last respects to her sister, when she was cremated on May 16, and about 400 people attended a memorial ceremony in Tokyo on May 29.

"I have no faith in the Japanese government," Ridma said. "When my sister was dying, an attempt was made to put some food into her mouth. She had been given high-dose painkillers and sleeping tablets and was unable to swallow. She didn't have any vitamins during the last few days of her life, and was not even given saline."

Speaking through Ridma, Sandamali's mother said: "My daughter was treated like an animal. Even animals should get better care than this."

Sandamali's relatives have called on the Japanese Minister of Justice Yoko Kamikawa to explain the circumstances leading to the young woman's death and to release video footage of her in detention. The request has been refused on the absurd and cynical grounds that it would undermine state security and compromise the "dignity" of the young woman. Ridma told the WSWS her sister's body looked like that of an elderly person.

Brief notes in Sandamali's diary make clear that her death was caused by the cruel and unlawful way in which she was treated. She wrote: "I cannot eat. They say it is because of tension. They don't take me to a hospital, as I am in their custody. Please help me recover."

Sandamali is the 18th migrant to die in custody in Japan since 2007, and the fourth person to perish in a detention centre there in the past 13 months. Official statistics show that less than one percent of applicants are granted refugee- or asylum-status in Japan. Of the 10,375 refugee applications made in Japan in 2019, only 44 were approved.

While the current number of migrants held in Japanese detention centres is 300, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 there were an estimated 20,000 migrant workers incarcerated in 16 centres, including in Osaka, Nagasaki and Ibaraki prefecture. They were released—without being granted residency or the right to work—by Japanese authorities, following the onset of the pandemic and in order to avoid any medical responsibility for the detainees.

Poverty, low wages and unemployment force millions of young people from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America to migrate to the Middle East and the advanced capitalist economies in Europe, the US, Australia and Japan, in search of work. Thousands of people tragically lose their lives in dangerous sea-crossings and other risky travel methods each year, trying to enter these countries.

According to Sri Lanka's Census and Statistics Department, the official unemployment rate among young people was 9.6 percent in 2020. The jobless rate for those aged between 15 and 24 years was 26.4 percent and as high as 36.3 percent for women in that cohort. Unemployment for women, in the 25 to 29 age group, was 18.9 percent and 7.1 per for men.

As in other countries, the Japanese ruling elite has responded to COVID-19 and the associated economic crisis by further tightening its immigration laws. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government recently moved to amend the country's Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act and allow authorities to repatriate asylum seekers whose applications are under appeal.

Under current laws, those seeking asylum are permitted to submit an unlimited number of applications for asylum status. The Suga government wants to limit the number to three, making it easier to deport those incarcerated in detention centres.

On May 18, the Suga government, in the face of widespread opposition, including mass demonstrations in several cities with many participants carrying

placards referring to Sandamali's tragic death, was forced to withdraw its anti-democratic amendments. The government indicated, however, that it would not shelve the bill altogether, but attempt to push it through the Japanese parliament in the near future.

Sri Lanka's external affairs ministry and its embassy in Tokyo did nothing to save Sandamali's life, let alone raise a protest about her brutal treatment or demand that the Japanese government explain how and why she died.

Colombo's silence is no accident. Like the ruling elites in other underdeveloped countries, the Sri Lankan capitalist class does not want to do anything to undermine the exploitation of its citizens working abroad, and hence disrupt the millions of dollars in foreign remittances flowing back into Sri Lanka.

Likewise, the Rajapakse government is totally indifferent to the plight of thousands of Sri Lankan workers still trapped in other countries, infected with COVID-19 or unemployed, and desperately trying to return home to their families.



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