Indian officials shed crocodile tears over Sri Lankan Tamil refugees

V. Gnana
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Sri Lankan Tamil refugee families detained for decades in refugee camps in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu have repeatedly tried to commit suicide in desperation due to conditions in the camps. Amid mounting anger across India against the murderous official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, this prompted a hypocritical statement from Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin.

On August 27, in a nine-minute address, Stalin said: “An advisory committee will be set up to look into long-term solutions, such as providing appropriate assistance to Sri Lankan refugees living in camps and those registered outside, improving basic facilities, granting citizenship and making suitable arrangements for them wanting to return to Sri Lanka.” He continued: “I would like to inform this legislature that 317 crore 40 lakh rupees ($51 million) will be allocated for this.”

He pledged to provide equipment, including electricity, toilets, running water, children’s education facilities and free gas stoves for 7,469 dilapidated houses in the camps.

Stalin’s sister, a parliamentarian and friend of Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, tweeted: “Thank you to the Chief Minister for announcing future plans and a dignified life for Sri Lankan Tamils who have been left without even basic facilities in the camps. A sea change for those who are lost in [a] sea of tears.”

In addition, the Tamil Nadu government has issued a decree renaming the “Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Camp” as the “Sri Lankan Tamil Rehabilitation Camp.” This is a cynical attempt by Stalin, the state government and the Tamil Nadu political establishment to distance themselves from their record of anti-refugee brutality—involving not only the ruling DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) but also the rival All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Stalinist parties.

The promises of the DMK and AIADMK are not worth the paper they are printed on. For decades, including in the last Tamil Nadu state elections, they promised during elections to grant refugees Indian citizenship and improve their lives. Invariably, these promises were dropped as soon as they were elected.

Like the pandemic, the bitter legacy of ethnic conflict in the Indian subcontinent cannot be fought within the framework of the capitalist nation-state system created by the abortion of the struggle against British imperialism after World War II, in the 1947 partition of India. A genuine struggle requires the international unification and mobilization of the working class.

Stalin’s declarations had clearly calculated reactionary political motives.

• First, the Modi-led BJP government, in the midst of the COVID-19 epidemic, and the criminal handling of the AIADMK and now the DMK in Tamil Nadu, have already provoked massive anger and protests among working people, especially among autoworkers. The DMK fears that the plight of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, who have widespread support among Indian Tamil workers, could spark a social explosion. So the DMK aims to burnish its Tamil nationalist credentials.

• Second, it aims to divert massive anger against the Modi government, its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its allies in Tamil Nadu into a “secular coalition” being prepared for the upcoming elections. The Stalinist Communist parties of India (CPI, CPM) and casteist and communalist parties are propping up the DMK.

These refugees fled to India during the 1983-2009 communal war in Sri Lanka. During the last 38 years, under Tamil Nadu state governments of all political colorations, thousands have lived without basic facilities or democratic rights in the camps. More than 70,000 people are housed in 115 camps in 28 districts of Tamil Nadu, including Madurai, Erode, Dindigul, Ramanathapuram, Sivagangai, Pudukottai, Coimbatore, Kanchipuram, Trichy and Tiruvallur. A further 34,135 Sri

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Lankan Tamil refugees are non-camp refugees in Tamil Nadu.

When the Sri Lankan civil war broke out in 1983, India's central Congress government and the AIADMK government, which came to power in the state through an electoral alliance with the Stalinists, lifted all Indian maritime security restrictions and allowed refugees into India. Tamil nationalist politicians went to the beach and welcomed the refugees. They held public meetings and launched hysterical anti-Sinhala slogans like "The Sinhala army alternately rapes Tamil women."

During the Cold War between the US government and the Soviet Union, representatives of the Indian bourgeoisie campaigned for the arrival of refugees in India. They used this to try to advance their regional hegemonic interests while highlighting "human rights abuses" in Sri Lanka. Reports of Sri Lankan military atrocities and the plight of the refugees flooded the Indian press.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinists in 1991, as the Indian bourgeoisie began to tack back towards Washington, the Indian political establishment increasingly denounced them as "illegal immigrants." They were increasingly branded as "suspects" of ties to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Tamil nationalist militia that fought the Sri Lankan government in the communal war.

The older generation of refugees are barred from any work. Their children are denied employment in the public and private sectors, even though they have graduated. Many thousands of illiterate youth are forced to work as day labourers in painting, building work, laying roads and shop work.

Some refugees, suspected by the Indian government of ties to the LTTE, are now housed in separate camps in Chengalpattu, Poonamallee and Trichy. These "special camps" are in reality prisons. Their inmates have no right to step outside. These camps are set up in rural areas, far away from the district towns, and monitored 24 hours a day by the police and the Tamil Nadu Q spy agency. Outsiders who visit relatives in the camp are interrogated by police and intelligence.

Nonetheless, the remaining leaders of the LTTE who are still banned in India, as well as poets, writers and spies in the second ranks of the LTTE as well as their families had significant influence in the Tamil Nadu ruling establishment. These included people in the DMK, AIADMK and the Stalinist parties, as well as in the film industry.

Last month, at the trial of a case filed in the Madurai High Court in 2009 by Sri Lankan refugees demanding Indian citizenship, the Indian government called Sri Lankan refugees illegal immigrants. This was done to pave the way for a refusal to grant Sri Lankan refugees citizenship, on the basis that India would then have to also grant citizenship to Bangladeshi, Afghan, Rohingya, African and Central Asian refugees. This announcement had a devastating impact, shattering long-standing expectations among Sri Lankan refugees and sparking a series of protests.

Eighty Sri Lankan Tamils detained in the Trichy special refugee camp protested, demanding their release. They are also staging various hunger strikes demanding their release and permission to live with their families. Last month, 20 people have been charged in connection with a hunger strike at a "special camp."

Then, a joint suicide attempt by 16 people—who took sleeping pills, tried hanging themselves or tore open their stomachs—shocked Tamil Nadu. On Saturday, August 29, Mahendran, who had been in a special camp for eight years, tried to commit suicide by drinking poison and was eventually admitted to hospital.

However, the DMK government has remained adamant that it will not give any guarantee of release. The past four decades have shown that while the DMK or AIADMK Tamil nationalist parties and their Stalinist satellites make hollow promises in election periods, they do not protect refugees. They are part of the bourgeois order that leads to war and has produced tens of millions of refugees in recent years.

The real protector of Sri Lankan refugees is the Indian and international working class, mobilized to fight for a scientific policy to eradicate the coronavirus and halt the COVID-19 pandemic and to defend the democratic rights of people across the region based on the struggle for socialism.

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