

Poor families in northern Sri Lanka flee to India to avoid hunger

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Reports indicate that dozens of poor families from northern Sri Lanka have fled to southern India, including Tamil Nadu, in the past four months to avoid hunger.

Rising prices and shortages of essentials such as food, medicines and fuel, and daily power cuts, have created unbearable social conditions for workers, youth and the poor throughout the island. This has produced an ongoing wave of protests since April with millions of workers participating in general strikes on April 28 and on May 6 to demand the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government and an end to the economic hardship.

Residents of Sri Lanka's North and East, who are still struggling with devastation of the 26-year bloody communal war that ended in May 2009, have been hard hit by the unprecedented economic crisis sweeping the country.

According to the media over 80 people had migrated from these areas to India by boat in an attempt to escape starvation in Sri Lanka.

* On May 2, a family of five, including a mother with a two-month-old infant, travelled to the Tamil Nadu coast in a fibreglass boat.

* April 25, fifteen people from Mannar crossed to Tamil Nadu by fishing boat.

* On April 10, a total of nineteen people, in two different groups, travelled in separate fibreglass boats to shallow waters near Dhanushkodi at the south-eastern tip of Pamban Island in Tamil Nadu. One group of ten, including two infants, were from Trincomalee, while the other group were residents of Mannar and Jaffna.

The boat owners generally leave the migrants a short distance from the Indian mainland, fearful that the Indian Navy will seize the boats. Passengers are

compelled to make their own way shore, expecting to be arrested by police and moved to a refugee camp. Another group of 20 migrants which arrived by boat at Dhanushkodi are currently being held at the Mandapam refugee camp.

Kodiswaran, who travelled to India with his wife, told the *Daily Thandi* about the worsening social conditions that forced them to flee.

"I made a living as an agricultural worker in Sri Lanka but because of the non-availability of seeds and pesticides for farming, we lost jobs. My wife is three-months' pregnant but it was not possible to take care of her in these economic conditions. We decided to come to India after paying the boat fare with the money we got from mortgaging all her jewellery," he explained.

A fisherman's wife explained to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters some of the difficult living conditions facing poor families. "A fisherman cannot afford the cost of goods with his small income and now there is a shortage of kerosene [used for boat engines]. The cooperative outlets only provide three litres of kerosene per person a week, with a litre costing 100 rupees [\$US28 cents]. Outside shops sell a litre of kerosene for 250 rupees," she said.

"Many poor people are now helpless without any source of income. Our weekly income is around 3,000 rupees but what can be done with this amount? If you want to purchase a packet of Anchor [brand name] milk powder, you also have to buy four yogurt cups. A packet of milk powder alone costs 850 rupees. Medicine shortages mean that kids can't even get a Panadol pill for a fever or a cold," she said.

The fisherman's wife explained that families had no alternative but to borrow money just to purchase basic needs. "Everyone in our village is unable to repay these loans. Money lenders' harassment is increasing. Our

identity cards are snatched away," she added.

Sivasangari, a young refugee, told the BBC's Tamil Service on March 23, that she undertook the dangerous journey to India because of the dire social conditions in Sri Lanka.

"The cost of our one-day meal is 2,000 rupees and if you add meat and fish to the meal, it's about 3,000 rupees. My husband is a day labourer who earns about 1,500 rupees a day. How can you feed children on that amount? We've received no help from the government so that's why we decided to risk death at sea to come to India with my brother's family.

"An hour after leaving Sri Lanka, the boat engine developed a mechanical fault. We struggled to stay alive in the middle of the sea with the kids for 37 hours without water to drink and food to eat until the engine was repaired. Life in Sri Lanka is a challenge from the moment we wake up in the morning and until going to bed. Many more like us are hoping to come to India," she said.

Poor Sri Lankan families who fled to India in late March were brutally separated from each other by Indian authorities and imprisoned. In 2012, India banned Sri Lankan refugees from entering the country, punishing them as illegal immigrants.

Confronting widespread popular opposition to these inhumane measures, the Tamil Nadu government has not arrested recent refugees but placed them in refugee camps previously established during the Sri Lanka civil war. The new arrivals are virtual prisoners with no social or democratic rights.

Young people previously born and raised in these camps are deprived of Indian civil rights and not allowed to get decent jobs in the public or private sector, even if they have a bachelor's degree. Thousands of illiterate youths have been forced to work as day labourers. Suicides are common in these camps.

Recent media reports describe Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. K. Stalin's response to the recent arrivals as "kind." These claims are false. Indian authorities, in fact, have reinforced their coastal patrols to block the entry of the Sri Lankan refugees.

Sri Lanka's Tamil nationalist parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), support Rajapakse's austerity measures while voicing hypocritical concerns about the plight of people. The TNA leadership has called for Colombo to implement the International

Monetary Fund (IMF) debt restructuring measures, declaring, "The Tamil people are used to this kind of suffering," a reference to the hardships suffered during the civil war.

Similarly, all of Sri Lanka's parliamentary opposition parties, including Samagi Jana Balawegaya, fully back the IMF program. President Rajapakse recently appointed United National Party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Sri Lankan prime minister to impose even more the IMF's brutal austerity attacks on workers and the poor.

This includes privatisation of state-owned enterprises, harsh government spending cuts and higher taxes, which will slash jobs, wages and pensions and drive up the costs of essentials.

The economic collapse in Sri Lanka is a sharp expression of an escalating crisis of global capitalism. The working class must take initiative and rally the poor, uniting Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim workers and build action committees in every workplace and suburb, independent of trade unions and capitalist parties.

There is no solution to this crisis within the capitalist system, which is why the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has advanced a series of demands to mobilise the working class to fight these social attacks, and for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist and internationalist policies. This includes the repudiation of foreign debts, seizure of the wealth of the billionaires, nationalisation of the banks, large companies and estates, and for production and distribution to be placed under workers' democratic control.



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