

Sri Lankan government detains hundreds fleeing overseas amid economic crisis

Wasantha Ramanayake
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Over 1,000 desperate people, mainly Tamils from the north and east of Sri Lanka, have been arrested this year trying to escape the food scarcity, starvation, and unemployment gripping the country, by emigrating.

In the latest incident, 10 people, including six women and children, were arrested on August 16 by the Sri Lankan navy in Talaimannar Sea off northern Sri Lanka. Many poor Sinhalese families have been arrested by the Sri Lankan and Australian navies while trying to get away from the worsening social conditions.

The number of migrants who travelled legally to seek employment abroad quadrupled during the first half of the year, with 32 Sri Lankans boarding a flight every hour, the *Sunday Times* recently reported.

The recent mass anti-government protests which forced former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country were fueled by unbearable poverty and severe shortages of food, fuel and medicine and lengthy power cuts.

The social catastrophe, however, continues unabated with the year-on-year inflation rate reaching 60 percent in July and food inflation hitting 90 percent. The cost of food is so high that millions of Sri Lankans have had to drastically cut back their daily food intake.

Elevated into the presidency by the discredited parliament, Ranil Wickremesinghe is using state of emergency measures and the state apparatus to suppress mass demonstrations as he prepares to impose new International Monetary Fund (IMF) attacks on the masses.

Battered by Colombo's almost three-decade communal war and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east are among the most affected by the current economic crisis.

Quoting Sri Lankan authorities, the Sri Lankan media

recently reported big increases in the number of people attempting to emigrate to Australia and India. Over 80 people fled to India during first four months of 2022, selling their possessions to pay for smugglers or rent boats.

"We were so desperate that we decided to go to Australia in a fishing trawler risking our lives because we can't think how we could afford to buy food for our three children in this country," said Malan (not his real name), a fisherman from the western coastal town of Chilaw.

"There's no diesel or kerosene for fishing boats. We have no income. We could not afford higher prices we paid for fuel. Our lives had been devastated," he said.

Malan, along with his wife and three children, were part of a group of 55 Sri Lankans arrested by the navy on May 20 in a fishing boat near Trincomalee on Sri Lanka's east coast. They were attempting to sail to Australia.

"There were seven women and four children. Only ten of us were Sinhalese and rest were Tamils," Malan said.

While most of the passengers were fishermen, some were small shop owners who paid operators between 700,000 rupees (\$US1,949) and 1,500,000 rupees (\$US4,177) for the dangerous voyage. They raised the money by selling their property, taking out loans or pawning jewelry.

"Now we have lost everything. We have fallen from the frying pan into the fire. We have no money and we are heavily indebted," Malan said, while explaining that their court cases would drag on for months.

"I have to spend more than 25,000 rupees for five of us for the court case in Trincomalee. The court case could be a torture for us, physically, mentally, and financially," he said.

If convicted, those arrested could be given a harsh two-year prison sentence and fined. These returnees are also disqualified from applying in the future for Australian visas.

A 41-year-old woman who had fled with eight members of her family to Rameswaram, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, told *Deutsche Welle* (DW) that her husband could not find a job and could not afford the daily cost of food. She was worried about their plight because they are being held like virtual prisoners without any rights at the Mandapam rehabilitation camp in Rameswaram which has been allocated for Sri Lankan refugees.

A 26-year-old painter, who had come from Sri Lanka to India with his wife in March, echoed these concerns. “We could not do anything in Sri Lanka because of the economic crisis. If I had known that we would be held in a refugee camp like this, I would not have come at all,” he told DW.

He explained that they had been in the camp for a month, without any idea of what would happen to them. He wanted to find some work in order to provide for his family. “That is all we ask for,” he said.

According to DW, there were almost 59,000 Sri Lankan Tamils living in 108 refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, with over 34,000 refugees living outside these camps. Many of had fled the country after Colombo’s anti-Tamil war that started in 1983 and ended in 2009.

In 2012, the Tamil Nadu state government withdrew its political asylum for Sri Lankans and treated them as illegal migrants until March this year.

When local Tamil Nadu residents protested against the arrest of the Sri Lankan asylum seekers, the state government was forced to take the refugees directly to the poverty-stricken rehabilitation camps.

The hypocrisy of the Tamil Nadu chief minister’s “good-will” gesture towards these refugees is exposed by the fact that India has tightened coast guard patrols of the Palk Strait to prevent any more Sri Lankan refugees entering India.

Successive Australian governments vilified refugees arriving by boat and implemented draconian measures to prevent them from settling in Australia, including the use of the navy to turn back boats and indefinite imprisonment in offshore detention centres.

In 2012, Australia’s Labor government sent foreign minister Bob Carr to Sri Lanka to stop refugees fleeing

from persecution, after the defeat of the separatist Tamil Tigers in 2009.

Those returned to Sri Lanka were subjected to interrogation, torture, and disappearances at the hands of the police and the military. Australia’s involvement in these operations is a blatant breach of the International Refugee Convention, which recognises the right to flee persecution, and a violation of the basic legal and democratic rights of Sri Lankan workers.

The Australian Border Force (ABF) recently handed over 46 “illegal” Sri Lankan migrants to authorities in Colombo. ABF regional director for South Asia Commander Chris Waters told the media in Colombo that Australian authorities had returned 183 Sri Lankans since May. He stressed that the recently elected Labour government has not relaxed any of Australia’s repressive migration policies.

The ABF said it had returned 125 illegal Sri Lankan migrants and a boat crew to Sri Lanka between June 1 and June 30, as part of Australia’s Operation Sovereign Borders, a military-led border security initiative established in 2013.

To prevent any influx of Sri Lankan refugees fleeing the current economic crisis, Australia has provided Sri Lankan authorities with 4,200 GPS trackers to install on fishing vessels, the *Guardian* reported June 22.



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