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The Experience of Tamil Refugees

An Interview with the Tamil Refugee Council

Anarchist Affinity

March 17, 2014

Aran Mylvaganam is a member of the Tamil Refugee Council. The Tamil Refugee Council was formed in 2011 to give a voice to Tamil refugees seeking asylum in Australia and has since played a key role in organising protests against mandatory detention and in supporting refugees living in Australia. Anarchist Affinity caught up with Aran to talk about his views on the Australian state's refugee policy and the contemporary refugee movement.

The Australian government insists it is safe for Tamils in Sri Lanka today. What is real situation facing Tamils in Sri Lanka?

In 2009 thousands of Tamils were killed by the Sri Lankan government and army. According to a recent report by the United Nations up to 70,000 Tamils were killed and it may be higher. According to Bishop Rayappu Joseph over 146,000 Tamils remain unaccounted for. Since 2009, the Sri Lankan government has been very busy suppressing the survivors, destroying evidence of genocide, and arresting anyone who

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may have been a witness to the crimes. Thousands of Tamil youth have been imprisoned under suspicion of having links to the Tamil Tigers. Hundreds of Tamil women face sexual assault by the army present in the North East of Sri Lanka. For every five Tamils there is an army man present in the North East of Sri Lanka. That is a very heavy military presence.

One example of the continuing genocide was seen in August last year when Tamil women from three villages in Kilinochchi were taken by government officials who said their children needed to receive vaccinations. Instead, the women were coerced into having surgery to insert long-term hormonal birth control implants. They were told they would be denied access to medical treatment if they did not accept the surgery. The Sri Lankan government is trying to change the demography of Tamil areas, they're trying to suppress the Tamil community, and they're trying to Sinhalise the Tamil areas. They are trying to complete the genocide of the Tamil people and the Australian government is helping them.

And the Australian state has been providing active support to the Sri Lankan state, hasn't it? For instance, the Abbott government donated two Navy ships to the Sri Lankan government late last year.

That's right. The Australian government was completely on-side with the Sri Lankan government's genocidal agenda since 2006. In 2006 three Tamil men were arrested by the Australian Federal Police on suspicion of having links to the Tamil Tigers. The police went into 300 houses and asked people why they had given money to the Tamil Tigers. They tried to silence the Tamil community from 2006- 2009. While the court case was going on from 2006-2009, that was when thousands of Tamils were killed by the Sri Lankan army. The relationship is there. We know that the Australian Federal Police, ASIO and the government were with the Sri Lankan government aiding them. The Australian government continues to aid the Sri Lankan government in many ways.

What have been some of the experiences of Tamil refugees seeking asylum in Australia?

Significant numbers of Tamil refugees started fleeing Sri Lanka after the killings in May 2009. The Australian government has tried to stop any Tamil refugees who fled Sri Lanka from speaking out against the Sri Lankan government. 42 Tamils refugees, as well as three other Burmese Rohingya men and a Kuwaiti man were declared to be security threats to Australia by ASIO. These are innocent Tamil women, men and children. They have been detained for the last four and a half years. They are being tortured by the Australian government. Their crime was to speak out against the injustices of the Sri Lankan government. That's the whole idea behind refugees having their security clearances rejected by ASIO. It's nothing to do with stopping the boats. It's about stopping Tamils from speaking out. It's about creating that fear within the Tamil community. It's about silencing the Tamil diaspora. They've used ASIO rejection as a means to do that.

Tamil refugees who come to Australia were the first group to face so-called 'enhanced screening processes'. What this means is that you're given 15 minutes to prove that you're a genuine refugee seeking asylum. If you don't do that then you're in trouble. You get deported back straight away. They don't even process your case. Through that process over 2000 refugees so far have been deported back to Sri Lanka. Tamil men and women and children flee the Sri Lankan government, they come here, and the Australian government gives them 15 minutes and deports them back.

This is the experience of the refugees.

What do you think has been missing from the refugee movement in Australia? What could the refugee movement be doing that it hasn't to date?

Broader representation has been missing in the refugee movement. It's all the left groups talking to each other, talking to the converted, about the plight of the refugees. I do believe

that we haven't tapped into the broader community in terms of raising awareness about refugees. I think there is really good regional area representation nowadays, which is a good thing. But we do need to tap into broader range of people, rather than just having rallies amongst left groups. Also, if you look at certain rallies relating to climate change or the Perth rallies against the culling of sharks you have thousands of people turning up to rallies organised at the last minute. These are people who are genuinely concerned about human rights and environmental rights. Why aren't these people turning out to rallies in support of refugees? There's something that we're doing wrong. I don't know what that is. We need to look at how we can attract all these people as well so that we can build a movement that will put pressure on this government to bring the cruel treatment of these refugees to an end.

Have refugees been left out of the "refugee movement" in Australia?

I don't think refugees have been left out of the refugee movement in Australia, but I do think that more could be done to put refugees at the front of the refugee movement, rather than just having odd speakers at rallies. There needs to be more involvement from refugee groups like the Tamil Refugee Council and RISE (Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees) to help build this movement, rather than just socialist groups. It's important that we have refugee groups, people from refugee backgrounds, and people who've been in detention centres having a say about how we should build this movement.

How is the Tamil Refugee Council responding the situation facing Tamil refugees in Australia?

The Tamil Refugee Council does a lot of work with refugees. We've been doing some welfare work for the last 18 months. I remember in June last year I went to this house where some of the refugee boys were sitting on the chairs, and didn't want to go to sleep, because the floor was too cold to sleep on. I went to another house in April last year to visit a group of

refugees living in Mill Park. They were out on bridging visas and didn't know where the shops were. They were given a packet of biscuits by the Red Cross and they ate only that for 24 hours. We try to identify these people and get out to them as soon as they're out into the community. We try to stop deportations whenever they are about to take place. Every time the Australian government mistreats refugees we react to that. Every time they do the wrong thing it's important that it gets highlighted. And we've been doing that consistently for the last 18 months.

I wish we could have done more to stop the deportations of thousands of refugees. I wish we could have stopped the suicide of Shooty, the Tamil boy who was indefinitely detained in Villawood detention centre due to ASIO, who killed himself two years ago. I wish we could have freed the 46 ASIO refugees currently still in detention. There are so many failures from our end in the sense that we haven't had the power to overcome this government.