

Sri Lankan soldiers speak:

'Most of us do not feel that this war is our war'

A correspondent
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During the past month the Sri Lankan security forces have suffered major defeats at the hands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is fighting for a separate state for the Tamil minority in the northern and eastern provinces of the country. The LTTE launched an offensive at the end of March, to capture the Elephant Pass camp, the gateway to the northern Jaffna peninsula. After four weeks of fighting, the strategic base fell to the LTTE on April 22 for the first time in the 17-year war. The sketchy military details vary but as many as 1,000 soldiers may have been killed and many more injured in the battle.

How could such a major base, heavily fortified and defended by well-armed troops, collapse? The total number of LTTE guerrilla fighters is estimated to be much less than the 17,500 soldiers who were stationed at Elephant Pass. The following report submitted to the World Socialist Web Site from a correspondent in Colombo provides a glimpse of the answer to the question. The comments of soldiers speak for themselves: the military collapse is bound up with a loss of morale among the troops, which in turn is connected to widespread and growing hostility to the war.

Since April 22 the LTTE has made other gains on the Jaffna peninsula. Fighting is now concentrated on the outskirts of Jaffna town—a city of 500,000—in the far north of the peninsula. The Colombo government has just offered an amnesty to army deserters—a desperate bid to fill the depleted ranks of an army no one wants to join. Previous official figures put the number of deserters at more than 10,000.

The following report was compiled from interviews with wounded troops in Colombo hospitals. There are about 200 soldiers in the National Hospital, the country's main hospital, who have been wounded in the current battles in the north. Thousands of injured army men have filled several main hospitals in the different parts of the country, including the war-ravaged northern province. Every day new soldiers are being admitted to the National Hospital, among them soldiers wounded during the Elephant Pass fighting nearly a month ago.

A **19-year-old soldier** from Dambulla, a rural area 150 kilometres from Colombo, was in the hospital after losing the

lower half of his left arm during an artillery attack. He was in a forward defence line with eight other soldiers, five of whom lost their lives. All the units in the area were under artillery and mortar fire from the LTTE. He explained that previously there were 600 to 700 men in a unit, but now the number has been reduced to 100 or 200.

He complained that the army had not been adequately prepared for the attack. But then he immediately added: “We joined in the war not only to defend the country but mainly to find a means of living. So most of our forces are not attacking forcefully but are attempting to save their lives. Some actually tried to avoid the fight altogether. They did not join the fight but started to retreat. When that took place even more faced death. The Tiger [LTTE] forces attacked us ferociously.”

He explained that he had become a soldier at the age of 17 with the help of a senior officer. He had to discontinue his studies, because his family had no adequate means of living.

A **25-year-old soldier** from the hill country in the centre of Sri Lanka said: “When I joined the army I knew nothing really about the war. I was forced to take up this job because of my youthful feelings and because I could not find any other job. In 1999, as soon as I had recovered from an injury I received at Vavuniya [the southernmost town of the northern province], I was sent back to the war front again.

“From Vavuniya we were sent to Elephant Pass. In the LTTE attack this time again I got injured in the same place. [He showed me his lap.] We can't refuse [to fight] and go home. We are forced to go to the war front. We will have to fight until we die. My family asked me not to go, but we are helpless.”

A **sergeant** attached to the engineering division had also been injured at Elephant Pass. He received severe burns to his face and most parts of his body as a result of a fire set off by an artillery attack. “A tube had been inserted into my throat due to an injury to my respiratory path. At that time I was unable to speak and in great pain. That tube was removed just seven days ago. After recovering I will have to go back to war whether I like it or not. That's our fate.”

He was angered by the military authorities' treatment of injured soldiers. “Soldiers who are injured are classified. If the

medical unit decides that your condition is not so serious you have to go back to the war. We have no say in those decisions. I am a father of two. My family members do not like my participation in the war at all. I have been in the army for 18 years. I have four more years before I can retire. I was unable to retire after 12 years' service."

Describing the chaos during the battle at Elephant Pass, he said: "We knew that we would be defeated. But we were not allowed to retreat, as we needed to. We had been ordered by higher authorities to destroy our weaponry and the camps before retreating. When the Tigers attacked, our people dispersed to every direction including towards the Tigers. Many of them may have fallen into the Tigers' hands and some may have lost their way."

A **23-year-old commando** who was wounded during a mortar attack at the Elephant Pass said many others in the commando units had died or been injured. "We were ordered to destroy arms. However we were unable to finish everything. Certainly those weapons left at the camp must have gone to the Tigers.

"Earlier I worked in a jewelry shop. We can't resign from the service at our choice. What a foolish thing I did joining the army. If I remained in the old job I would not face this situation."

A number of soldiers expressed suspicions that the Elephant Pass debacle was the result of betrayals by army higher-ups. They said there were rumours that high-ranking army officers had sold information about the army's plans to the enemy. These soldiers said the LTTE was able to preempt the army's plan of attack and launched an assault a few hours earlier. Whether these suspicions are correct or not, they reflect deep distrust and growing discontent in the lower ranks.

A **commando** from the Pallai camp, which fell into the LTTE's hands a few days after the collapse at Elephant Pass, described the situation in the army and on the warfront in detail.

"The capture of Elephant Pass by the LTTE is a significant defeat. We are facing not a single defeat but a series of defeats. Due to these attacks we have already lost more than 2,000 soldiers during the last month alone. At the moment we are being pushed towards the sea. We feel angry when we see newspaper reports that paint a rosy picture about the war.

"We were in an enormously difficult situation. Sometimes we had to starve for several days. There was not enough food in the camps because there was no way to transport food to the front. We were only able to wash our faces after two or three days when we returned to the camp.

"The attack on the Elephant Pass camp was a powerful assault. I have seen such things only in western adventure films. The terrorists [LTTE] attacked ferociously. We had to leave the wounded soldiers behind. How many times have I heard the sad voice of soldiers pleading with us to take them along!

"Once soldiers thought that they could win the war. During the past few months the situation has completely changed. Everyone wants to stop the war by any means. We cannot win this war—most of us have that idea. As we abandon wounded soldiers in the battlefield to their fate, a feeling of helplessness spreads. A situation is growing where the lower ranks do not obey the higher ranks. Friendliness among us is disappearing.

"Why have they [LTTE] such a spirit and why don't we have any? Can anyone explain why?" he asked and then continued: "Most of the soldiers have joined the army to find a means of living, just to find a job. When we face a powerful attack what comes to our minds is our family. Most of us do not feel that this war is our war. We feel we get killed and maimed in a war that is not in any way connected to our lives.

"I came to know from the television that the army's engineering division is going to put up 100,000 banners to encourage us and to rally the support of the people (for the war). But I don't think even one million banners would change the present psychology of the army."

Asked about the government's new emergency laws banning strikes and protests he exclaimed: "Where are the army and police to use them [the regulations] against the workers? Only a bit more than 1,000 new recruits joined the army when the government planned a recruitment of 15,000."

Asked about the position of Tamils, he said: "It is a sordid story. They are sandwiched between attacks from both sides. They have to flee from place to place abandoning their belongings. When we see them carrying small children—some of them are like my own small ones—we feel sad. Even we soldiers do not receive enough food or medicine. You can understand what their situation must be like. What kind of education could children get in this situation?"

Finally when asked what he thought should be done, he said the war should be ended—even through the Norwegian initiative [Norway is attempting to broker peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE]. But then he added: "We feel utter helplessness as well as pessimism."



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