

Sri Lankans condemn the government and its new emergency laws

'The denial of the right to information is equal to slavery'

A correspondent
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The following interviews were submitted to the World Socialist Web Site by a correspondent currently visiting Sri Lanka. The names have been withheld in order to protect those interviewed. Under the country's draconian emergency powers all media reports have to be submitted to the government censor who routinely cuts not only details of the intense fighting on the northern Jaffna peninsula but anything critical of the Peoples Alliance government and its policies. As one of those interviewed commented dryly, even a report on the country's dwindling elephant population did not escape the censor's pen.

Those interviewed represent a wide cross-section of Sri Lankan people from small shopkeepers and students to plantation workers and filmmakers. All of them speak eloquently and forcefully of their hostility to the emergency powers that not only impose censorship but outlaw all strikes and protests and allow the military to commandeer personnel and equipment for the war. They also voice their desire for an end to the protracted war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a distrust of the entire political establishment and their belief that working people—both Tamil and Sinhalese—share common class interests.

A group of workers from the Kurukude plantation in Bandarawela, 200 kilometers from Colombo said: "We have to follow the rules of the government and the plantation managers and be at their beck and call like puppies. Recently the military threatened us. They would not allow three or four people to even get together and talk in front of the factory. We do not want the war. We also do not want the country divided. What we want is the right to work. Day in and day out we are thinking of a way out. Earlier we could travel to see our relatives in India. Now our children cannot even go to nearby Bandarawela town."

A peasant youth from Bandarawela said: "All the governments on the island have made things impossible for us. It is especially difficult for people like us engaged in farming. These rules (the emergency laws) affect workers most. Now they cannot even strike. My mother was a plantation worker. Today plantation workers are living in a state of hunger. So are the peasants. Our lot is the same.

"Nowadays there is no profit in farming. However much we produce even in a good year we can't cover the cost of cultivation. We bury our labour in our plots of land only because we have no work elsewhere. We find it next to impossible to market our products. There are cases of peasants being driven to suicide. My mother sent me to school with the little money she earned as a plantation worker. Now I work on this plot of land. These new regulations directly stand in the way of our protesting against this situation in an organised way."

A three-wheeler (small taxi) driver in Maradana said: "The situation in the country is very precarious. All power has been given to the police and the military. They can occupy vehicles, homes and people any time they please. What is the purpose of the President? The leader of the people

herself has handed over authority to the military and the police. The rights of the people have been wrested from them. At any moment the military can take hold of the President herself. Haven't such things happened elsewhere in this world? The future is fraught with even greater dangers.

"It is true that people are afraid to speak out. If the Sinhalese cannot get together to express their ideas how can Tamils and Sinhalese get together? We must establish the right to express ourselves even by breaking laws. Politicians are not to be trusted. They always look after their own interests. The salaries of the members of parliament were increased recently because the President wanted to get their support."

A resident from Pelawatte, a suburb of Colombo, explained: "The news is that the situation in the north is not good. One gets the feeling that our lads have been cornered. How did the present situation come about? Both the UNP [United National Party] and the PA governments boosted the war. Now everybody has to pay for the division of two nations that lived together for a long time.

"The past political leaders are responsible for this. The Tamil leaders were their friends. But at that time things were not so bad as today. How many of these leaders have killed each other? That shows that none of them have a correct perspective.

"The breakdown of unity among communities was not a good thing. The silence among ordinary people in the face of this disaster is even more grave. The law against the expression of ideas is worse than the law of the jungle. When one is prevented from knowing what is happening, how can one prevent what is going to happen?

"The Tamils have been subjected to injustice. They tried to overcome this in collaboration with the Sinhalese. It is not small people like us that committed the communal crimes in 1983 (the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983). Those people [racist thugs] were organised by the then government—the UNP.

In those days I worked in a distribution agency. The van driver was a Tamil. He knew all the byroads in the plantation areas. He knew the Buddhist monks in every temple. Very often we would stay the night in a temple where the friendly monks entertained us. Our driver showed us the roads. This is not a war which the poor Sinhala or Tamil folk have taken to heart. It is a pleasure to think how harmoniously we lived at that time."

A Muslim teacher in a Tamil school said: "We thoroughly condemn the communalism and the war in this country. Peace is so sweet. War is miserable. The two are incompatible. Trying to combine this into one is ridiculous. Both major parties need the war to buttress their authority. This intensifies divisive tendencies. The essential service rules imposed by the government deny people their elementary rights.

"Parents of the soldiers fighting in the north are kept in the dark about the situation that their children have to face. The denial of the right to information is equal to slavery. The government is using these laws to

cover up the truth. This is injustice. It is under these conditions that the morale of the military is low, unlike that of the Tigers [LTTE]. If the war is not finished, thousands of lives, billions of rupees and the valuable time of our country will be lost. Peace is lost. None of the leading political parties have a solution. What is needed is an alternative political program.”

A Tamil plantation worker attacked the emergency regulations saying: “I am 50 years old and have enough experience. Things have progressively worsened. The new laws multiply the military and police powers. The right to strike is so necessary to defend our living conditions but it is taken away from us. The employers take advantage of this situation. They know that our hands are tied. Some of the companies have started to stop wage increments to which workers are entitled.

“The trade union leaders justify these laws because they can cite them to avoid any struggle. They hoodwink us. No workers rights can be won without a struggle. There are situations where we have been compelled to bribe the trade union leaders to speak up for us. We face terrible living conditions without rights or facilities. In the plantation where I work there are cases of 12 people living huddled into a compartment 12 feet by 12 feet.

An unemployed Tamil youth from the Glenuge tea plantation near Hatton in the central hill region said: “I worked in Colombo for six years. The harassment and ill treatment by the police and the army drove me to give up my job. Tamils, especially young people, are rounded up by the military in regular operations in Colombo. In the case of Tamils even the possession of an identity card is no guarantee of safety. (Every person over 18 years of age in Sri Lanka has to carry an identity card.) You are arrested and kept in camps or police custody for days on end. I decided that I could not put up with this anymore and decided to return to Hatton. The new regulations by the government are bound to increase the suppression of poor people.

Another plantation worker said: “These laws empower the police and the military to restrict the right even to attend a call of nature. They stifle the rights of the people in the South regardless of ethnicity. They try to place the burden of the defeats in the North onto the shoulders of common people in the South. This can drag [Sri] Lanka into a Pakistan-like situation [military coup].

“The members of parliament used our votes to get into parliament. They promised to oppose the war, now they have voted for this repressive legislation. The union leaders have all the way supported the PA [Peoples Alliance] in this war. The biggest plantation union, the CWC [Ceylon Workers Congress] is participating in the government. Their support has been vital for the PA to prosecute this war against the Tamil people.

“These repressive regulations have been imposed by the government to block the demands of the workers. The government plans to intensify the war. The war is dragging the country down a precipice. Billions of rupees in public money, which would otherwise be used to ameliorate the conditions of people, are being consumed in this war. The purpose of keeping the country on a war footing is to suppress any opposition by the working class. How can workers fight against speed up without the right to strike? This will lead to a Hitler-type dictatorship in Sri Lanka. All the plantation trade unions assist the authorities and work against the workers. Now these injustices are being reinforced.”

A young worker from Hatton: “My parents couldn't afford to spend money on my education. I left for Colombo to work when I was 12. I did not have a national identity card so the military and the police arrested me several times. Last year I was detained for 14 days at the Maradana police station. So I had to leave my job and stay at home. No more jobs for me. Young people, wherever they go, have to face the worst.”

A student at the Jayawardenapura university in Colombo said: “These laws demonstrate the depth of the government crisis. It is preparing for a fascist type of rule wiping out every democratic right we have now. The

raising of the Sinhala chauvinist cry is part of this. If anyone thinks these regulations are for the suppression of the Tamil people only, they are mistaken. This is a step to bind the working class, sweep aside any right won in the past with its own strength and suppress any uprising if it occurs.

The LSSP [Lanka Sama Samaja Party] and the Communist Party leaders in the government have strengthened the hands of the state. They have declared that if the LTTE demands war it must be given war. Workers, peasants and the oppressed must fight for their own independent program.

A former LSSP member said: “The government is facing military defeats while the workers are preparing for a big strike against the government. The new regulations have made this illegal. The military are losing and the workers are striking. This is a situation that the ruling class cannot afford.

“I am 65 years old and I fought well against the anti-worker attacks of the rulers. The LSSP used to lead the workers in those days. But nowadays it is part of the government and is collaborating with it. I was a Trotskyist in my time. We need a Marxist party to lead the working class.”

A non-academic staff member at the Engineering Faculty of the Open University in Nugegoda, a suburb of Colombo, commented: “The imposition of emergency regulations means that the government can preempt a struggle against the privatisation of the postal department, the wages struggle of the plantation workers, and suppress the masses and increase the economic burdens including through the defence tax. Last year the university staff indecisively agreed to make sacrifices hoping that the war would end soon as the government had promised. But this year they keep on saying: who knows what is going to happen?”

A restaurant keeper in Maradana, a shopping area in central Colombo surrounded by slums attacked the new emergency powers saying: “If the government had not been lying all the time why would they want censorship now? They are trying to shut everybody up when it is impossible to cover up the truth.

“Although the government keeps on saying that it will not give up the Jaffna peninsula, the morale of the military is very low. A cousin of mine serving in Chavakachcheri (near Jaffna) wrote home yesterday. He used to insist that the LTTE was not as strong as it was made out to be. This time he asked his family to hold a religious service for him.”

Asked why morale among the troops was so low, he explained: “The people in the South are so burdened that they have hardly any time to think of the soldiers fighting in the North. While lives and wealth are destroyed by the war, the political and military leaders have enriched themselves. These leaders do not want to stop the war, not because they think they can win it, but because it is a profitable business for them.”

The owner of a communication centre explained: “I used to buy only the *Ravaya* [a Sinhala weekly]. Today I buy Sinhala dailies like *Lakbima*, *Divaina* and *Lankadipa*. None of them give us a correct account. We cannot listen to the *BBC* nowadays. [The emergency regulations banning live broadcasts also blocked the

BBC's Sinhala and Tamil services.] I asked the news vendor this morning about the situation. He said: ‘Please sir, do not ask me what is happening. I do not know.’ Talking about the war can be interpreted as talking against the war and, talking against the war can be interpreted as talking against the nation. And we can be put behind bars for that.”

A film director commented: “War or no war a government can put the country on a war footing. Such a thing is advantageous for its repressive purposes. It was ridiculous to see in this country how some of the leading media organs campaigned for press censorship. Whereas in other countries the responsible media would immediately oppose such a move, here they became its leading acolytes. A press hankering for repression. It was interesting to see censorship clamped down on the very newspapers that called for it.

“Nor were foreign media spared. This is a wonderful censorship that whittles down not only the news regarding the military situation but also articles commenting on Central Bank reports. Believe it or not, even an article discussing the plight of the dwindling elephant population was censored. As artists and ordinary people we cannot but oppose this censorship vehemently.

A political science professor commented: “This is a racist war and the ruling class has a use for it. The severe military defeats suffered by the state forces during the past few weeks have deepened the crisis in ruling circles. The government knows that the feelings against its war are widespread and the fresh economic hardships imposed by it will add to this hostility. Daily needs such as electricity, water and telephone bills have been directly increased and the increase in the defence tax immediately affects all the fundamental needs of the people. It is under these circumstances that all manifestations of public consciousness are blocked.

“The disillusionment among people is not simply with parties, individuals and their policies but in the very process of what has been presented as democracy. Totally devoid of all public trust, the government is now heavily dependent on the leaderships of extreme rightwing parties, on the one hand, and the trade union leaders, on the other. In fact it is surviving on the credibility supplied by their support. The masses have responded quite skeptically to the jingoist appeals by rightwing movements—both recently formed and of longer standing—to submerge popular indignation in a wave of chauvinism.”

A veteran Sri Lankan dramatist said: “The restriction of freedom of expression especially through art is not unprecedented in this country. Under the present regime, artists who have produced anti-war and anti-racist work, which could influence mass consciousness, have been the victims of state-sponsored violence. Now this repression has been given legal justification and can be carried on openly. This is dangerous.

“While any material regarding the war is subjected to the strictest censorship, decadent works that fan Sinhala communalism and a warlike mentality have a field day. In fact the state media is propagating them.

“Although the war was used as a pretext to justify these actions, the present repressive laws are part of a blueprint to attack the living conditions of the masses in every direction. This government has not fulfilled any of its promises to the masses. The primary objective of the present restrictions is to put down the simmering opposition against the government.”



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