

The families of Sri Lankan soldiers speak:

'Whoever wins this war, the poor people stand to lose'

A correspondent
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A correspondent currently visiting the country sent the following interviews with the families of Sri Lankan soldiers to the World Socialist Web Site. No names have been published in order to protect those interviewed from prosecution under Sri Lanka's stringent new censorship regulations.

Hundreds of soldiers have been killed in recent fighting in the north of the country against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Thousands more have been wounded. Each day hundreds of family members can be seen at the country's main hospitals or near the Colombo military headquarters inquiring about the fate of their sons and daughters.

Their stories speak of the suffering and tragedy that has befallen many ordinary people whose sons, fathers, brothers and husbands joined the army, often out of dire economic necessity. A number expressed their desire for an immediate end to the bitter 17-year civil war.

A sister of two soldiers described the fate of her brothers caught up in the war. She is from Ratgama, a township on the southern coast. Her elder brother was killed at Pallai, close to the Elephant Pass army camp, on May 1. He had deserted about 18 months earlier but reported back after being persuaded by the military police. Her younger brother, also a soldier, is in the Jaffna battle zone.

She explained that her brothers had little choice but to join the army. "Our father was a worker in the government survey department. He died 11 years ago. There are five children in the family. Our eldest brother is an epileptic and so our mother was forced to work in a limestone quarry. She used to vend young coconuts as a drink on the wayside. She had to visit houses and do menial work."

Her husband is also on active military service with the 9th artillery regiment. They have three children. "I always pleaded with my husband and my brother not to go back to the army. But my husband used to ask what he could do at home. If one by one we stopped at home how could we even sustain ourselves?"

"If a dead soldier's body is disfigured beyond recognition they pour hot tar over the body and list him as missing in action. The war is accursed a hundred and thousands of times. I

pray that this war that gave us this agony of fire be stopped at any cost before the same suffering is brought upon others."

She blamed the politicians for the catastrophe. "The PA (Peoples Alliance government) promised to stop the war in 1994. We voted for this. But that promise is in tatters. I don't trust anyone now. People join the war not to save the country but because that they have no way to live. But once they don the uniforms and take up arms they get chauvinist feelings."

A widow from Kadawatha, a few kilometres from Colombo, explained that her husband was killed on May 10 at Chavakachcheri on the Jaffna peninsula. "My husband joined the army because he had no other job. He had to spend the best part of his life for a useless war. He had served 11 years and got several medals but could not get a transfer. He was planning to leave in a year and a half when the compulsory 12 years was over. But now he is lost for ever."

She has a six-year-old son, is expecting another child and said she could not imagine what the future held for them. The soldier's father is in a state of severe shock over the death.

A mother of a missing soldier said: "My son went to defend the country but in the end we could not even see a fragment of his body. When an entire camp is running away, leaving even the cannon, will they stop to pick up a wounded or dead?" Her son, 33, a lance corporal in the 9th Infantry brigade, was reported missing on April 27 following the Sri Lankan army retreat from Elephant Pass.

"The UNP [opposition United National Party] as well as the PA are responsible for this war. Whoever wins this war, the poor people stand to lose. We are losing our children. Who will look after us in our old age? And their children are orphaned," she said.

Other family members explained: "He joined the army not listening to our pleading. There are seven boys and girls in our family. He was the eldest. He told his friends: 'I joined the army to sustain my parents.' Our father was a farm worker and for a number of years has been unable to do any work due to serious illness."

The wife of corporal, who has a nine-month-old daughter, said: "On April 21 we got a letter from him. He wrote, 'Tigers

have surrounded us on all sides. I would even walk home (over 300 kilometres) if I could. No New Year festivities for me. But I am happy that you will be enjoying the New Year.' [The Sinhala New Year falls in April.]

"He always used to say, 'there will not be anybody to look after the children and you if something happens to me.' He stayed in the army to repay a loan of Rs.10,000 [US\$133] he had got from the army to fix electric lights for our home.

"He never talked of what was happening at the front when he was at home. This time he took a camera with him when he went to the front to show us how they lived. But he wrote back that he was not allowed to take it to his bunker."

The widow of a sergeant major explained: "My husband joined the army because he wanted to follow his father who had also been in the military service. The sooner the war is over the better. The grief we suffer is common to many. Entire families are orphaned. We cannot think of a future. We have to be ready to face things as they come. All our plans for the children are in ruins. Although he was in the military for 16 years he never used to talk of the war at home. Whenever we tried to make him do so, he would say, 'talk of some thing useful'."

In the same neighbourhood in Watugedera in the south of the island, a family was mourning the loss of a soldier who was killed at Elephant Pass on April 20. He had been in service for over 10 years and was a member of the Special Task Force. He had given up his education after 'O levels' in 1985 when his father died.

His mother said: "He did not want to let the responsibility of running the home rest solely on his brothers. They are carpenters by trade. But there is not much work in the building trade. I refused to give him money for the preliminary application. But he took 96 rupees from his sister's savings and went for the interview. Two other friends who joined with him were killed during their training period. One of his friends was wounded earlier and was brought to Colombo. He is disabled and was discharged from the military.

"My eldest son has gone to the Middle East for employment. We lost this one just as the family was raising its head. The eldest had started sending home money. My son was not of a mind to go [to the front] this time. He went only because one of his colleagues insisted. Both of them are now dead. My son had been wounded three times in the war. He wanted to stay back. But he said the military police would come for him."

A wife of a sergeant major said: "It is better if this war ends, saving the lives of the people. Will they be able to end the war as they have bought new weapons? My husband was able to save his life in the battle at Elephant Pass. But his brother has been disappeared."

She explained that there is an understanding that if one family member in the army dies in action, then the other will be released from the service. So she prays that her husband will be released.

She is from southern Sri Lanka and has four children. "I

married five years ago. I did advanced level exams, but I was unable to find a job. Now I have to live in fear for my whole life. If my husband does not do his service then the police will come to arrest him."

The grandfather of a soldier recently killed in action explained that young people joined the army because they were unable to earn enough living from farming. He is from a village near Bandarawela in the central hill country. "In this village most families are in dire poverty," he said. "Some go to tea plantations to earn something to live.

"My neighbour's son joined the army because he could not bear the suffering his poor mother had to go through to feed them. But my grandson studied English, typing and technical studies to get qualifications for a job. One day he left home, saying that he had got a job. But he had joined the army. We pleaded with him to resign. He asked: 'Can you look after me till my end? Can you find a husband for my sister without money?'"

A postal worker from Gampola in the plantation area spoke of his wounded brother after seeing him at the Colombo National Hospital. "My brother will not be able to walk, as his leg has been severed from his body. He was caught in a missile attack. He maintained a whole family. But now he will have to live with the help of others. We were from a family of a five. Three of them are married. My younger sister studies in the university. Only my brother could help her. My father, sister and brother earlier did some cultivation in a small plot of land less than an acre. We are too poor to help the family."

When asked about the war, he said: "It is necessary to do this war to save the country." But in the same breath, he added: "This is tragic war. If there was no war the lives of many youth could have been saved."



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