

# Sri Lankan military threatens antiwar filmmakers

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Over past two weeks, senior officers in the Sri Lankan armed forces have issued a series of barely disguised threats against filmmakers who through their works have been critical of the military and the country's protracted civil war. As well as being a flagrant breach of democratic rights and a direct intervention by the "neutral" armed forces into political life, these actions are a clear warning that the military top brass is preparing for war.

According to last weekend's *Sunday Times*, the armed forces official spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratnayake, accompanied by Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera, recently held an informal meeting with several prominent directors of antiwar films at an unnamed advertising agency. According to the article, Ratnayake and Weerasekera warned the filmmakers "they would have to face the consequences if the war breaks out again" and demanded that they "should also make films on behalf of the army".

One of the films targetted by the military is *Sulanga Enu Pinisa* (The Forsaken Land) that won an award at this year's Cannes Film Festival—the first ever for a Sri Lankan cinema production. Others include the internationally acclaimed films *Me Mage Sanadai*, (This is My Moon) by Asoka Handagama, *Ira Mediyama* (August Sun) by Prasanna Vithanage and *Sudu, Kalu saha Alu* (Shades of Gray) by Sudath Mahadiwulwewa.

The meeting with the directors is the latest step in an orchestrated campaign to intimidate filmmakers and other artists. It began with a comment in the September 4 issue of the *Sunday Times* by Rear Admiral Weerasekera entitled "The war, black cinema and the morale of the soldier". Clearly sensitive that these films had tapped into widespread popular sentiment against the war, the admiral declared:

"Today the war is a national problem and hence in my opinion, anyone who makes a film on war must exercise the utmost care. Everyone knows the destructive nature of the war. Any individual can make any number of films on war showing its direct impact on the society, social life etc. But through such films, if the services of the troops are condemned or if the soldier and his wife are scoffed at and if the potential youth in the country are discouraged from joining the services then it is time to raise the objections."

Rather than depicting the brutal realities of a war that has cost

more than 60,000 lives and led to immense suffering throughout the island, Weerasekera suggested: "In my opinion in films based on war, love and affection for the soldier should also be included so that a respectable or a dignified picture of a soldier is drawn in the mind of the spectator at the end of the movie."

Weerasekera concluded his article by declaring: "If there is a film on war even indirectly contributing towards fulfilling terrorists' objectives willfully, then it amounts to treason and should be dealt with severely." In the language of Sri Lankan politics, this sinister message has only one meaning: that the offending filmmakers can expect to face punitive legal action or violent attack—if not directly by the military, then by associated Sinhala extremist outfits.

Weerasekera's article was followed by a visit to the National Film Corporation (NFC) on September 13. The admiral, along with Brigadier Ratnayake and an unnamed air force officer, met with the head of the NFC. According to several media reports, Ratnayake seized on the international acclaim accorded to the films to develop further on the theme that they were treasonous. The films were "foreign-funded cinema," he declared, implying that the directors were in the pay of foreign masters.

At the meeting, the military delegation accused the NFC of approving films that were "a premeditated attack on police and security forces". One newspaper reported that Ratnayake went even further, branding the antiwar films as "a new form of terrorism". He declared the filmmakers were "vehicles of terrorist propaganda hell-bent on ridiculing the armed forces [and] delighting the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]".

No one in the political establishment has criticised the military or called it into line. On the contrary. *Sulanga Enu Pinisa* was due to be screened at the Bandaranaike International Memorial Hall during the International Book Exhibition held from September 7 to September 18. The day after the meeting between the military and the NFC, the screenings were cancelled.

The military's threats against filmmakers are taking place in the midst of a presidential election campaign in which the issue of war is central. The ruling elites, including the state apparatus and the military, are sharply polarised, over whether to

maintain the existing ceasefire and pursue talks with the LTTE, or plunge the country back to war.

United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe with the backing of big business is pushing for a continuation of the “peace process”. Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate Mahinda Rajapakse has allied himself with the Sinhala chauvinist organisations, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which demand the abrogation of a joint government-LTTE deal to distribute tsunami aid and a renegotiation of the current ceasefire.

The campaign for tough action against the LTTE intensified following the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on August 12. Despite the lack of evidence, the media and political establishment accused the LTTE of carrying out the murder. The JVP and JHU seized on the crime to ratchet up a shrill campaign for its demands, which are unacceptable to the LTTE and set a definite course for war.

Far from being a neutral bystander, the military functions as a quasi-political party, pressing the interests of its officer caste, which has derived prestige and material benefits from the war. For sections of the military top brass, deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism, the ceasefire itself was an act of treachery.

When the UNP was in government from 2001 to 2004, the military chiefs connived with President Chandrika Kumaratunga to undermine peace talks and the ceasefire through a series of provocative naval attacks on LTTE vessels. Over the past year, sections of the armed forces have given covert assistance to a breakaway LTTE faction in the East that has been engaged in a tit-for-tat campaign of murder and armed clashes with the LTTE. This conflict threatens to destroy the ceasefire.

It is no accident that Rear Admiral Weerasekera is involved in menacing filmmakers. He was Eastern Naval Area Commander based at the port of Trincomalee and overall in charge of military security in the sensitive northeastern district. His hostility to the ceasefire became very apparent in May when Sinhala extremists erected a Buddha statue in the centre of Trincomalee, causing outrage among local Tamils and heightening communal tensions. Weerasekera openly supported the provocation—an action so blatant that President Kumaratunga was compelled to transfer him out of the area.

However, Weerasekera was not disciplined or reprimanded. Instead, he was placed in the specially created position of Deputy Chief of Staff at naval headquarters. Expressing the frustration and resentment of layers of the military high command, he continued to agitate against the ceasefire. According to the *Daily Mirror*, at a passing out ceremony at the Poonani Navy training camp in July, he accused those who refused to take action against the LTTE of “cowardliness and timidity”.

Weerasekera also attended a meeting of top military officers on July 26, at which President Kumaratunga appealed for

support in implementing the government’s joint tsunami aid agreement with the LTTE. The admiral responded by bluntly declaring that the president should re-activate the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) or declare a state of emergency to crack down on LTTE activities in the East.

Until now, Weerasekera could perhaps have been dismissed as something of a rogue officer. But the provocative campaign against filmmakers makes clear that he is acting with the blessing of the top echelons of the military high command. The warning is not simply being directed against artists but at the media and anyone else who speaks out against a return to war. By acting now, in the midst of a presidential election, the military may also be seeking to influence the outcome.

The filmmakers are simply a convenient target—a scapegoat for the army’s disintegrating morale and high desertion rates. Far from being the cause, their films reflect the broadly felt attitudes of the majority of the population, including the ordinary soldiers, who are in the main economic conscripts from among the island’s Sinhalese rural poor. In an army numbering about 140,000, some estimates put the number of desertions over the course of the war up to the 2002 ceasefire as high as 50,000.

Weerasekera’s call for films that include “love and affection for the soldier” and uplifting endings is a clear signal that the military wants to prepare public opinion for war. The failure of the major parties or the media to criticise the admiral and defend the democratic rights of filmmakers is highly revealing. While sections of the ruling elite are seeking a negotiated peace deal with the LTTE, they remain mired in Sinhala communalism and thus incapable of challenging the military or its warmongering.

The Socialist Equality Party condemns this attack on the democratic rights of filmmakers and calls on workers, young people and intellectuals to come to their defence. The open intervention of the military into political life is a sharp warning that any return to the island’s deeply unpopular war will be accompanied by a savage assault on the democratic rights of all.

To combat these dangers, the working class cannot rely on any of the existing capitalist parties but must mobilise independently on the basis of a socialist program. We urge our readers and supporters to support the SEP and its presidential candidate Wije Dias, who is campaigning to unify workers in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally around this perspective.



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