

Sri Lankan filmmakers oppose military threats

Panini Wijesiriwardena
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Last month, several well-known Sri Lankan directors and dramatists spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) to oppose recent threats against local antiwar filmmakers by senior military officers.

Although the Sri Lankan film industry produces a handful of feature films annually, a number of directors have distinguished themselves in recent years with thoughtful movies about the catastrophic impact of the 20-year civil war by the Sri Lankan military against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The conflict has killed more than 60,000 people with over one million displaced or made homeless.

While these intelligent films, which provide some indication of the widespread opposition of ordinary people to the fratricidal war, have been acclaimed internationally, they have earned the ire of sections of Sri Lanka's ruling elite and the military. As political and economic tensions escalate, and the three-year ceasefire becomes increasingly fragile, this animosity has intensified.

In early September, the *Sunday Times* published a lengthy comment by Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera naming directors Vimukthi Jayasundera, Asoka Handagama, Prasanna Vithanage and Sudath Mahadiwulvewa and denouncing them for their antiwar movies. Weerasekera claimed that the films aided terrorism, were tantamount to treason, and declared that the directors should be making patriotic movies.

Weerasekera, accompanied by the armed forces official spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratanayke and a senior air force officer, later met with the head of the National Film Corporation and suggested that the international acclaim and funding of these films meant that the directors were in the pay of foreign masters. According to one news report, Ratanayke declared that the antiwar movies were a "new form of terrorism" and the filmmakers "vehicles of terrorist propaganda".

A meeting was then held with Asoka Handagama and Sudath Mahadiwulvewa who were told that they should make pro-army films and warned that they would "have to face the consequences if the war breaks out again".

As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously explained in "Sri Lankan military threatens antiwar filmmakers" this unprecedented intervention came in the wake of the assassination of Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and the eruption of anti-Tamil agitation by extreme right-wing Sinhala elements, who were demanding full-scale war against the LTTE.

Vimukthi Jayasundera, director of *Sulanga Enu Pinisa* (*The Forsaken Land*) and one of those denounced by Admiral Weerasekera, has become a particular target of these chauvinist elements. Jayasundera's movie won an award at this year's Cannes Film Festival, the first Sri Lankan film to receive such a prize. It is a powerful depiction of the psychological after-effects of the war on

ordinary people (see Toronto International Film Festival 2005—Part 3).

When the film was removed from five Sri Lankan cinemas on the orders of the National Film Corporation, the 26-year-filmmaker withdrew his movie from local circulation in protest. He received a number of death threats and has been forced to leave Sri Lanka in fear of his life.

Other movies specifically criticised by the military brass include, *Me Mage Sandai* (*This is My Moon* [2002]) by Asoka Handagama, *Ira Mediyama* (*August Sun* [2004]) by Prasanna Vithanage and *Sudu, Kalu saha Alu* (*Shades of Grey* [2004]) by Sudath Mahadiwulvewa.

This is My Moon tells the story of a Sri Lankan army soldier who becomes involved with a Tamil girl and deserts the military, returning to his rural village. The film, which is critical of the Buddhist clergy, was denounced by Sinhala extremists (see "No substitute for thoughtful character development").

Veteran director Prasanna Vithanage's *August Sun* is set in 1996 and uses three interweaving stories to show how the war has affected a number of individuals—a Muslim family, the girlfriend of a missing government air force pilot, and a rank-and-file soldier.

Shades of Grey dramatises the difficult social and personal problems facing poverty-stricken Sinhala villagers in combat zones who have been resettled during the current ceasefire agreement. It exposes state and non-government organisation corruption, the breakdown of traditional family relations, the rise of prostitution, and psychological trauma amongst soldiers.

Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, a well-known local filmmaker and veteran dramatist who has written and directed several antiwar plays, told the WSWS that he was deeply concerned about the political implications of the military attacks on moviemakers.

Bandaranayake is no stranger to political intimidation by right-wing elements. He received several death threats from Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) members during 1988-89 and went into hiding. His production of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, which he translated into Sinhala and reset in contemporary Sri Lanka, was bitterly denounced by Sinhala nationalists.

Over the past year he has been threatened by the Therapuththabhaya Brigade, another Sinhala chauvinist outfit, over his long-standing collaboration with Tamil artists from Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern provinces.

"The denunciations hurled against *The Forsaken Land* and the arguments used in this campaign forcefully reveal the cultural breakdown that Sri Lanka has undergone during the past few decades," he told the WSWS.

"When reading these diatribes I was overcome with a deep sense of

danger that Sri Lanka is drifting towards a dictatorship.”

“The only way to defeat this is to mobilise artists internationally,” he added. “I don’t think it can be done just by local artists gathering together in various political parties. Nor will this problem be solved by hobnobbing with reactionaries and corrupt and artistically-barren minds or wining and dining with murderers.”

Boodee Keerthisena, winner of this year’s Presidential Award for *Mille Soya (In Search of Wealth [2004])*, also raised concerns:

“According to democracy in any given country, there are state-controlled institutions to maintain the standards of local film creations. In Sri Lanka we have called it the ‘Censor Board’, although other countries may give it another title.

“In Sri Lanka,” he continued, “the ‘Censor Board’ has given permission for these antiwar films to be shown throughout the island. This means that if anyone tries to stop the screening of these movies or campaigns to prevent other people seeing them it is clearly anti-democratic and beyond normal rules.”

Veteran director Prasanna Vithanage told the WSWS that he had grave concerns over the military’s attempts to intimidate local filmmakers.

Vithanage began his artistic career as a dramatist and stage director and has made five movies in the last twelve years—*Ice on Fire (1992)*, *Dark Night of the Soul (1996)*, *Walls Within (1997)*, *Death on a Full Moon Day (Purahanda Kaluwara [1999])* and *August Sun (2004)*.

Vithanage’s first antiwar film, the internationally acclaimed *Death on a Full Moon Day*, was banned in 2000 by the Peoples’ Alliance (PA) government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the first local movie banned under the PA’s so-called emergency laws. In protest against this blatant attack on democratic rights Vithanage refused to accept the prestigious Sri Lankan Presidential Award for *Walls Within*, voted the best film for 2000.

Condemning the military’s threats Vithanage said: “When I saw Sarath Weerasekara’s article I suddenly recalled the words of Sarath Amunugama [former Minister for Irrigation and head of the National Film Corporation].

“When my film was banned in 2000, I submitted a petition to the Supreme Court in defense of my fundamental rights. But Amunugama’s official response to the petition justified the ban, claiming that he was ‘duty bound’ as a Cabinet member ‘to prevent any situation that may affect the morale of the security forces, the war effort of the Government, the recruitment drive launched by the armed forces and the police and any violation of the laws of the country by the distribution and the release of *Death on a Full Moon Day*.’

“And what does Weerasekara says? He claims that ‘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 objections... 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.’

“In 2000, I told a press conference that ‘Artists do not have to make films according to government demands’. I would now say that artists shouldn’t have to make films according to military commands.

“This military bullying can only be seen as part of an exercise to drag Sri Lanka back into outright war. In fact, the central question in the current presidential elections is war, so this sort of political agitation and the threats from the military are part of the same

program.

“The fate, problems and misery of the masses from the 20-year war that have been depicted in our antiwar films are a fatal blow against this war mongering. That is why they are trying to intimidate us. And to be blunt, these threats against freedom of art reveal a ruling class that is rapidly moving towards dictatorship. This intimidation is not the end, but just the start.

Vithanage said he “highly appreciated” the *World Socialist Web Site* because every time art or artists faced “difficult situations, such as banning or the recent military threats”, it always “comes forward in defense of art.”

“When *Death on a Full Moon Day* was banned,” he continued, “the WSWS launched a powerful international campaign, which was an important contribution in forcing the film’s release.

“At the same time it provides accurate political guidance. I agree with the saying that ‘art lags behind the politics of the day’. In the meantime, no art or artist is independent from politics. As Trotsky explains, art can be compared with a flying kite. Art should enjoy the freedom of a kite as it flies in the sky. But the kite is always tied with a thread to a certain point on earth. And that is, politics.”

The military denunciations of Sri Lankan filmmakers are another indication that senior levels of the Sri Lankan military are preparing for a resumption of the bloody conflict in the North and East. They also demonstrate that any return to the island’s fratricidal and deeply unpopular war will be accompanied by a savage assault on the democratic rights of filmmakers, artists and working people as a whole.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the WSWS condemn this attack on freedom of expression and the democratic rights of filmmakers and call on workers, young people and intellectuals to come to their defence. To combat these assaults, the working class cannot rely on any of the existing capitalist parties, but must mobilise independently on the basis of an international socialist program.

We urge our readers to support the SEP and its presidential candidate Wije Dias, who is campaigning to unify all workers, of all backgrounds, in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally, around this perspective.



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