

# Relatives of recently killed Sri Lankan soldiers speak to WSWS

**Our correspondents**  
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Sri Lanka is rapidly descending once again into civil war. More than 100 people have been killed in ambushes, clashes and assassinations since Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won the November 17 presidential election.

The chief responsibility for the escalating violence rests with Rajapakse who, in order to gain the support of the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), agreed to a series of provocative demands on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Following the election, the military has stepped up its repression on the Tamil minority and is in all likelihood connected to a series of killings of LTTE members and supporters.

The LTTE appears to have responded in kind. More than 50 army and navy personnel have been killed in ambushes since the November election. The latest occurred last Friday when a navy gunboat was rammed and sunk by a boat packed with explosives, killing 13 sailors. Like the military, the LTTE has denied any involvement in the attacks.

The WSWS interviewed the family members of a number of soldiers who have been killed recently. Most Sri Lankan soldiers are economic conscripts—poor rural youth who have been forced to enlist to support their families, only to be used as cannon fodder in the bloody 20-year war. Exploited in death as in life, the government, military top brass and the media hail the “heroes” for their defence of “the unitary state” against the “Tiger terrorists”.

The WSWS interviews reveal a different picture. They reflect the widespread and justified fear of a return to all-out war, suspicion and anger at the new government and all political parties, and concerns over the continuing deterioration of living standards.

**Mahinda Liyanage** was killed along with at least 10 other soldiers when the army truck in which they were travelling was hit by a land mine on December 27. The truck was taking arms and the soldiers from Point Pedro on the northern coast of the Jaffna peninsula to the Palaly army complex further south.

Mahinda came from the village of Buluwemuduna in the hill country near Kandy about 140 kilometres from Colombo. His wife and three-year-old son live in a half-finished house along with his parents and two sisters. His wife Manjula is pregnant with another child.

His father, 64, is working at a petrol shed in Kandy. One of his sisters is still studying and the other is working in the Celltronic factory in the Pallekelle industrial zone. One of his brothers is also a soldier, currently serving in Haiti as part of the Sri Lankan battalion sent to participate in the so-called peace-keeping forces. The other brother is a police constable.

Mahinda’s wife, Manjula, explained how she heard of her

husband’s death. “On the night of December 27, we heard some noises and tapping on the door. We were fearful but a village priest told us not to be afraid as some army people had arrived. A corporal, who is also disabled, told us the news. The next day, army men came with Mahinda’s coffin and gave us 75,000 rupees (\$US750) for the funeral. My son asked me where his father was but the coffin was sealed and it was prohibited to open it.”

Mahinda joined the army in 1995 when he was 22. He studied at the Liyangaswagura junior school up to Ordinary Level, but was forced to leave his studies because of the JVP’s activities in the area in 1988-89. At the height of its fascistic terror campaign, the JVP was forcibly recruiting young people to its patriotic front. Mahinda went into hiding in the Ratnapura area then got a job at a filling station before joining the army.

In 2000, when the military suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the LTTE, Mahinda was severely injured in a blast at Chavakacheri, near Jaffna. After recovering, he was transferred to another army division and served in several camps. Manjula said her husband had been due home on leave in January.

Mahinda’s father said: “There is something wrong with the ceasefire agreed upon by the LTTE and the government three years ago. Under the ceasefire, we hoped there would be no danger for our sons in the army. At least in that sense we lived without fear and terror. But now the fear and uncertainty have returned to our lives.”

The army gave Mahinda’s wife a standard certificate for dead soldiers saluting her husband as a brave soldier “defending the unitary state.” As the family noted, even the inscription on the certificate was wrong, saying Mahinda had joined the army immediately after leaving school.

“We did not want to send our sons into the military. It seems no one in power wants to end this war,” his father exclaimed. Another villager commented: “They said that he sacrificed his life for the unitary state without fear and bravely. But defending this unitary state means defending the capitalist system, doesn’t it?”

About 10 young men from the same village are in the military. And several women are war widows. Villagers have erected bus shelters in the memory of dead soldiers. A woman explained that Mahinda and her brother, who died in the fighting in 2000, were classmates and both joined the army. Before then, none of her family of seven had jobs and now four were surviving on her brother’s pension.

Mahinda’s funeral took place on December 31 at a village cemetery. Nearby was the tomb of another soldier, Corporal Karunathilake, who was killed in 1999. The army sent representatives but no one came from any of the major political parties. According to one person, a local JVP parliamentarian attended but did not identify himself.

One of Mahinda's relatives explained: "The central province governor Sarath Ekanayake visited before the funeral but said nothing about the upsurge of violence. He has just asked what we needed. There are 150 houses in this village. We have electricity but no water supply. We have to pay 75 rupees per month to the temple to take three pots of water a day, because a motor is used to pump water from the well. Otherwise we would have to walk half a mile for water."

Most of the villagers are day labourers earning 350-400 rupees a day, when they have work. There is no farming because of the lack of water. Very few young people could manage to obtain higher education.

We also visited another village, Karagastenna, three kilometres away. Another 10 young men from that village are in army because there are no jobs.

One of the Karagastenna soldiers, Dushantha Kumara, was killed in 2000. His younger brother also joined the military but left several months later. His mother has been distraught since the death of her elder son and collapses every time she hears about the killing of soldiers. Four family members are living on Dushantha's pension.

**W.B. Sunil**, a soldier in the Sri Lanka Army (Volunteer) Regiment, was killed on December 27 in what was believed to be an LTTE attack on his house at China Bay in the eastern town of Trincomalee. The attackers first stoned the house then opened fire and threw grenades at those who came out to see what was happening. Sunil was killed on the spot. His wife L.G. Gnanawathie and her younger brother L.G. Premaratna were severely injured and were admitted to the Colombo National Hospital.

Sunil was 51 and had two daughters and a son. His funeral was held at his hometown of Dehiwala, to the south of central Colombo, on December 31. He had worked as a driver before joining the army in 1988.

His mother, A.A.T. Margaret Perera, told the WWS: "I lost my son. I was terribly shocked when I heard the news. In just one more year he would have retired. In this residential area there are Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil people and everyone lives together with peacefully. My family members and I used to go to his house several times a year. We never had any problem.

"His death is a result of Mahinda Chintanaya [President Rajapakse's program]. President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is pushing the country toward war again. He is working according to what the JVP and the JHU tell him. I don't believe this government will be able to stop war and bring peace to the country.

"If the war does break out again it will be a huge disaster. The LTTE will blast bombs everywhere and so many innocent people will die again. This government has failed to provide enough facilities for tsunami victims even after a year. How can it resolve the other problems of the country? I still give shelter to two families of tsunami victims."

Sunil's brother-in-law said: "One month before his death, our family went to his place and visited areas like Koneshwaran, Seruwawila, and Kinniya without any disturbances. Many people—Sinhala and Muslim—came to his funeral. Some Tamils wanted to come, but they didn't out of fear. The government has no clear program to solve the problem and the LTTE has been engaged in provocations."

We visited Sunil's wife and her brother Premaratna in hospital. She was too distraught to speak at length but Premaratna explained: "I heard the LTTE had warned my brother to leave the area. This has all happened because of the climate of war in the country. We are against

resuming the war. If war erupts there [in Trincomalee] we will not be able to live in that area." Premaratna was a farmer then worked in a hospital but lost that job.

**R.M. Upananda Ratnayake**, 23, was killed in the same mine blast as Mahinda Liyanage. He joined the military in May 2004 after studying up to advanced level high school. He engaged in sport and was very popular in his home village of Nelligashinna near Badulla, 210 kilometres from Colombo. Some 300 people came to his funeral, along with 50 to 60 army personnel.

Upananda's mother and father are tea plantation workers like most people in the area. He had two sisters and a brother. Previously his family lived on the Eladaluwa Estate then settled in a small house at Nelligashinna near the estate. The village has no facilities. The piped water supply is inadequate, so villagers have to walk for about a kilometre to fetch drinking water in plastic containers.

R.M. Ratnapala, Upananda's father, was a member of the district committee of the United Plantation Workers Union (UPWU). He blamed the war on the policies carried out by all the ruling class parties. "All the governments are the same. The LTTE is working in its own interests. The one good thing about the ceasefire agreement is that it saved the lives of many people.

"Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidential election because of the support of the JVP and the JHU. The politics of the JVP and JHU are based on communalism that divides nationalities. The JVP is not a Marxist party. Like the other left parties that betrayed, the JVP did the same.

"More than 20 years ago I was in Jaffna. The people there were educated and efficient farmers. But they did not get the opportunities they deserved. So they tried to get those opportunities by fighting. The government says the LTTE should lay down its arms. They might not lay down arms because they think they have no protection."

He was critical of the comments of a local JVP councillor, Saman Mahinda, at his son's funeral. "His remark about my son's participation in tsunami relief work is a lie. He said my son also went to help tsunami victims there [in the north]. He was not in a position to help tsunami victims there. The JVP weaves a web of lies for their own advantage."

At the funeral, the JVP councillor declared: "Upananda sacrificed his life for the unitary state. We salute war heroes who sacrificed their lives to defend the motherland."

Ratnapala bitterly responded: "To have a united state there should be proper conditions for everyone—workers and peasants, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims—to live together. This present governing system is no good.

"No one knows what [President] Mahinda [Rajapakse] will do in the future. However, the danger of war has increased since he came to power. The international community should not give weapons to either side. They are coming here not because of any sympathy [for us] but for their investments."



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