

WSWS speaks to families of soldiers killed in Sri Lanka's war

Our correspondents
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As the Sri Lankan military continues its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the number of dead and wounded soldiers is rising dramatically. According to the official casualty figures, 159 military personnel have been killed and another 452 injured during fighting since the beginning of August.

President Mahinda Rajapakse provocatively ordered a "limited, humanitarian" offensive involving several thousand troops on July 26 to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate. Fighting has since spread to other parts of the North and East of the island, with continued clashes on the Jaffna peninsula. The 2002 ceasefire agreement is, in effect, a dead letter.

Once again the coffins of soldiers killed in the fighting are returning south. Most of the troops are poor rural youth who enlist to provide for their families and then are used as cannon fodder in the war. The government, the media and Sinhala chauvinist groups attempt to distract attention from the mounting toll of misery with patriotic phrases hailing the "supreme sacrifices for the motherland".

However, as *World Socialist Web Site* reporters found when they spoke to the families of dead soldiers, there is considerable frustration and anger that poor working people are once again bearing the brunt of the war.

Champika Prasad, a 19-year-old soldier, was killed in Muhamalai by a rocket-propelled grenade on August 12. Fighting was intense on the night of August 11 as the LTTE sought to advance northward up the Jaffna peninsula. Muhamalai is a key army forward position near LTTE-controlled territory.

Prasad joined the army in March 2005, soon after leaving school and was deployed last December to the Muhamalai forward defence line. He last saw his family on July 13. His body was returned in a sealed

coffin. According to his family, his face had been badly disfigured.

His home was in the poor, isolated village of Neththipola in Kurunegala district, about 80 kilometres from Colombo. The only transport to the village is a small bus from nearest town of Kuliyaipitiya. After finishing school, most young people have no job opportunities, leaving the army as the only option.

Prasad's father, P. Simpeenus, told the WSWS his family did not like him joining the army. But he had no job and was drawn in by the military's recruitment advertisements. "The ceasefire was good," he said, "but we don't like [the LTTE] dividing the country. It would be good if the problem could be solved peacefully. My son came home several times. Though he said he liked the army, he asked his mother not to allow his younger brother to join."

Prasad's grandfather, P. Rankira, blamed Sinhala communal parties for the war, rather than the LTTE. He explained that Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese had previously lived together in the area. Tamil teachers from Jaffna taught in the Muslim schools. He said the main reason for the war was the anti-Tamil riots in 1983. He recalled how Tamil-owned shops had been burned down by Sinhalese thugs. "That was how the war started. I don't know even the alphabet. But that is how I understand the situation," he said.

He also spoke of the chauvinist terror campaign waged by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1989. "In those days we closed the doors to our houses at 5 p.m. because of their threats. They are the people that are bringing the war now. Some of the Buddhist monks are also demanding war."

Prasad's elder brother said Prasad was not happy farming because of the difficulties. The family has less than a hectare of land to grow rice and other crops. Last

season, they were unable to sell all their rice and received a low price for what they did sell. The government has paid them 30,000 rupees, or \$US300, to cover funeral expenses.

Asela Thilakarathna, 26, from Alhitiyawa, 15 kilometres from Prasad's village, was killed on August 2 in the eastern town of Muttur. He had a wife and a child.

Asela's mother Sumanawathi said: "Asela joined the army in 2000. He only came home for his father's funeral in 2001 with difficulty. My daughter is working at a biscuit-manufacturing factory, which is going to close because of rising flour prices. She earns only 3,000 rupees a month. My other son works as a trainee at a garage in Colombo but receives no income."

Asela's wife Krishanthi Nadeeka explained: "Asela didn't come home for nearly two months. Last time he told me that there were claymore mines everywhere. He was killed in a mortar attack. He was identified by his brothers who travelled to Trincomalee. We are in a desperate situation and don't know what is going to happen to us.

"We don't like the war. We don't know whether war will be over and whether there will be peace. We saw on the TV what Buddhist monks did in the antiwar meeting. They call for war." Last week, Buddhist monks attacked the speakers at an antiwar rally and attempted to break up the meeting.

H. M. Somathilaka Ranasingha was killed by a claymore mine on July 31 during the military offensive to capture the Mavilaru sluice gate. He joined the army in 1991, after studying up to ordinary levels at the Atampola school in Kuliypitiya. At the time of his death, he was living in the village of Rilpola in the Badulla district.

His mother Magilin Nona explained that the family of seven children had a very hard life at Narammla village in North-Western Province. Her husband and other family members worked as labourers. Four of her children had joined the army to earn a living but her daughter and eldest son later resigned. Her youngest son is still serving.

"We lost our son because of the war. Now we are old. There is nobody to look after us. We do not even own a small plot of land to cultivate. There is no way to survive but by labouring again."

Somathilaka's wife, H.M. Rupawathie, said she felt

utterly helpless with her two children: "Hundreds of thousands of rupees and relatives will not fill the gap. Before my marriage, I worked in a garment factory. Now I cannot work there. It has been closed for months."

She explained that her two-year-old daughter was asking about her father. "What shall I do now? I am against the war. How many more like me have become helpless because of it? We were happy during the cease-fire period. My husband was also happy because there was no war."

Another relative, W. P. Karunaratna, was angry about the JVP's role. "Now the JVP is encouraging a war. Earlier [in the 1980s], they campaigned for a patriotic war. They threatened people and demanded that people strike. I faced this when I was working in the Mahaweli irrigation scheme.

"Poor youth, without jobs or any future, join the army and get killed by the dozens. No one who has property and privileges go to fight. No one wants to get killed. Everyone wants peace."

Corporal R. Siriwardana, 38, was killed in fighting at Nargarkovil on August 14. His father was a railway worker and his family survives on 350 rupees a month from the government's welfare program. A relative pointed to his tiny home and said the family could not hold his funeral there because there was not enough space for even 10 people.

"This war should be stopped. This is a communal war. Poor people are dying in this war," he said angrily.



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