

WSWS interviews: Sri Lankan soldiers oppose return to war

Our correspondents
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As the civil war in Sri Lanka escalates, the military is carrying out a massive recruiting campaign in the press and electronic media. The government is making an explicit communal appeal, declaring that it is the duty of heroes to defend the “Sinhala motherland” against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Recruiting targets have not been met. Within the army, reports have filtered out of disgruntlement and war weariness. Since President Mahinda Rajapakse won office last November, hundreds of soldiers and military personnel have been killed in a conflict that has widened into open warfare.

The overwhelming majority of soldiers come from poor Sinhala families in rural areas. Most had no alternative but to join the army to provide for themselves and their families. In short, they are economic conscripts who have been used by successive governments as cannon fodder in a racist war.

Despite the government’s constant communal agitation, there is widespread opposition to a war that has already lasted two decades and claimed 65,000 lives. Significantly, many people blame not only the government, but the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has alienated its rural supporters by openly advocating war.

Well aware of the discontent in army ranks, the government and defence authorities have tightened censorship and issued threats to film directors and the media not to undermine morale. The “heroes” hailed in the government’s propaganda are not permitted to openly talk to the press. Over the past two decades of war, an estimated 40,000 soldiers have deserted.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) recently spoke to two soldiers who have been serving in the war zone on the Jaffna peninsula and returned home for leave. Their personal details have been withheld.

The first soldier lived in a thatched house built near marshy land. The house was only 24 square metres, with a tiny hut behind, used as the kitchen. The floor was covered with bricks but not plastered and so was damp. There was also a new, uncompleted house. The marshy land measuring about 650 square metres belonged to his father.

The soldier was the eldest of three brothers. The second eldest had completed his advance level at high school but had no permanent job. He helped the family by working odd jobs. The youngest was still at school.

The soldier explained: “I had been a vocalist in a local musical group since my school days. Although I loved music, I had to abandon it and join the army.

“Our family doesn’t have a proper place to live. So I started to build a new house. I am planning to finish the roof during my next holidays. We are paid an extra 2,000 rupees [\$US20 a month] when we are on operational duty and also some other allowances.”

Speaking of his battlefield experiences, he said: “We were following a commando group in an operation. Five out of eight in my group were killed. Only seven survived from the 70-member commando group. I also received minor injuries.

“We man forward bunkers. There are three or four of us in a bunker. Meals are provided to the bunker. We work in two-hour shifts. But we cannot rest in the bunker because of the constant tension. It is then that we think about the uncertainty of returning to our villages.

“This war is useless. It is not necessary. The war brings us only death and disability. But now we have no escape from this. When I am on duty in the bunker during the day, I can see only palmyrah trees (a type of palm) and bushes. I wonder why such a fierce war is being fought to capture these lands. Then I become

thoroughly disillusioned.”

Speaking of his fellow soldiers, he said: “Some are disappointed about the war like me. Some say we have to fight this war. Mostly soldiers keep their thoughts to themselves. Most are very poor like me. The majority are from poverty-stricken farming areas like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa.”

His father, whose only income was from casual work, said: “See, they are at war again. My son is fighting war now and I burn with fear. What can I do? When the police brought the message that my son had been injured I was so worried about him.

“This is not our war. This war has been created by the political leaders. During the off-season for fishing, we used to go to the north or the east for fishing. We were close like brothers with Tamil fishermen in those days.” His son nodded approvingly.

“The responsibility for this devastation rests not only on the politicians of the main parties but also the JVPers. In 1989, my brother was ordered by the JVPers to stand at a village shopping centre with a sign hanging around his neck because he had voted in provincial council elections. He was threatened with death if he defied JVP orders again.”

The second soldier told the WSWS: “I really had no idea about the army. If I had known, I would never have joined. I started going to sea to fish after dropping out of school. Everyone vomits at sea for the first few days, but with me it was continuous. So I joined the army as there was no other work.

“The war was fierce when Chandrika [Kumaratunga] was president. We were assigned to bury the unidentified bodies and body parts of soldiers. After that incident, I didn’t report back for duty once I got leave. I deserted for about three years and went back to fishing.

“But after the war started again I was afraid I would be arrested for deserting. I would wake up afraid. Once, when I heard a vehicle approaching at night, I rushed out of the house and ran. I rejoined five or six months ago to avoid this mental torture. Soldiers can [legally] desert under some conditions [by repaying the army its costs]. But we don’t have such a large amount of money because we are very poor.”

Referring to his fellow soldiers, he said: “Most of them are the children of very poor farmers. They have joined the army because there are no jobs in their areas.

They are young people, married and unmarried, hoping to help their families out of severe economic problems—to build house or meet daily expenses.

“I am one of them. My old house was dilapidated and collapsed. I have two daughters. During my leave, I have started to build a new house. But I can only cover the roof with cadjans [coconut leaves]. I hope to finish the walls on my next leave.”

Describing army life, he said: “Our subdivision’s job is to maintain security after the army captures an area. We patrol for two hours, do other tasks for four hours, then patrol for another two hours. After taking leave, some soldiers do not report back. As a result, our workload is increased. We have to cover their work as well. This time I was away for four and half months.

“The meals for ordinary soldiers like us are poor. Our officers get good food. They can buy liquor at their mess but we have nothing. Higher officers subjugate lower officers next to them and this subjugation continues down the ranks to the ordinary soldiers. Even among soldiers, seniors subjugate juniors. This is the way in the army. Any argument with an officer is a punishable offence.”

Speaking about a recent offensive, he said: “This time there were more casualties. The Tigers [the LTTE] had set land mines connected to grenades and arranged them so that about 100 mines would explode at once. The army’s multi-barrel [rocket] and heavy artillery attacks have caused severe damage to people and their property.

“We are made [by the army] to see any Tamil person as a Tiger [LTTE member]. Ordinary Tamil people don’t like us. I say no to war. The war will bring only death for ordinary people and soldiers—and also permanent disability. The war is not necessary.”



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