Sri Lankan soldiers and families speak to the WSWS

Our reporters
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Hundreds of injured soldiers have been hospitalised in Sri Lanka after a military offensive in the Muhamalai-Nagarkovil-Kilali area on April 22-24 was beaten back by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The operation involved about 800 troops directly, backed by another 5,000 personnel.

Wounded solders are now undergoing treatment at the Palali military hospital on the northern Jaffna peninsula, Anuradhapura hospital in north-central province, the National and Military hospitals in Colombo, and the Kalubowila and Jayawardenapura hospitals in Colombo's suburbs.

Nervous about the political impact of the defeat, the government has imposed de facto censorship by barring journalists from the hospitals. Military police guard the entrances to wards where injured soldiers are being treated.

At the National Hospital, Accident Service director, Dr Anil Jasinghe, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he could not reveal the number of injured soldiers admitted and could not allow reporters inside. Troops have also been posted near funeral parlours to prevent journalists speaking to the families of dead soldiers.

WSWS reporters did speak to some injured soldiers at a Colombo hospital, whose names we cannot publish for their own security. All were under the age of 30. As we entered the ward, we were shocked to see young men, who had barely begun their adult lives, severely maimed. Some had their legs amputated while others had lost their hands or were totally deaf.

Their relatives were mainly from remote villages and very poor. Their faces were strained from shock and grief. Most soldiers are economic conscripts from poor rural backgrounds, forced to join the military by poverty and the lack of employment.

The soldiers had been sent to the battlefield from three camps—Muhamalai, Nagarkovil and Kilali. The offensive started at around 9.30 p.m. on April 22. At some places, the troops were initially able to push forward into LTTE territory. But then the LTTE attack started, using mortars and 81mm guns. Soldiers told us that they now think that the LTTE had laid a trap—allowing the advance, then counter-attacking.

The soldiers had not been told how many were killed or injured in the operation. Since being hospitalised, they realised that the casualties must run into the hundreds. They had not been briefed before being sent into battle. They had simply advanced under officers' orders.

A 26-year-old soldier, who had been shot through the back and upper arm, told us: "My father is a farmer and has been paralysed for about 15 years. My mother is dead. Due to our family's severe poverty, my elder brother joined the army when he was 18. Later, I joined.

"I was a good athlete so I was recruited to the army's Physical Training Institute in Panagoda. I worked as a Physical Training Instructor (PTI) from the beginning. Now I am married and my wife is pregnant. I am the one who looks after my family, including my father and brother.

"I thought that PTIs would not be sent into battle. We were once told that we would be attached to schools to form cadet platoons. I thought that that was a better alternative because my brother lost one of his legs in an earlier battle. Once we become handicapped, we cannot find civilian jobs.

"Even though the president, the ministers and the top military officers maintain that the war will conclude soon, I think it will drag on indefinitely. It is clear from the experience of this battle that we were driven back. When we were attacked, we were not provided with

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additional firepower. Later, it was provided, but by then all hell had happened."

Another soldier, also 26, said: "I joined the army eight years ago when I was 18. Because we were poor villagers, almost all the youth joined the army. Although we can get leave occasionally, we cannot meet any of our friends because not all are granted leave at once.

"My father, mother and sister—everyone in my family—depend on my income. This is the second time I have been hospitalised with severe injuries. My earlier injuries gave me a deaf right ear. It seems I must lose my right hand this time. That means I will not be able to work.

"I have a fiancée in my village. I postponed the marriage in the hope of building a house after earning some money. I was trying to meet that target when I was injured the first time. The girl's parents believe that this year is inauspicious for me, according to the horoscope, because I am a soldier. So, the marriage was postponed again.

"When you have fallen into a pit, you have to come out through the mouth of the pit itself. So, I have to complete the required number of years in service and then retire."

A mother-in-law angrily told the WSWS: "After the Rajapakse government [in November 2005] came to power we thought the war would end soon, peace would be accomplished and living conditions would improve. There is no sign that any of these will happen in the near future."

The soldier's wife emphatically declared. "I will never let him [her husband] go to war again. When he was injured previously I begged him not to go into battle again. But he left, saying there was no other way to feed and clothe the family."

Separately, the WSWS visited the village of Kohombawatta, about 73 kilometres from Colombo, where the funeral of S.M. Sisirakumara took place on Sunday. The 26-year-old was among the soldiers killed in the Muhamalai offensive on April 23.

His grief stricken mother, H.A. Kusumawathie, explained to the WSWS: "I have never been to school. I wanted to provide my five sons with education. When Sisirakumara wanted to join the army in 2000, I opposed it and appealed to him to continue his education. But because of the poverty at home he wanted to join the army. He was the fourth of my five sons.

"Since then he left the army several times but rejoined because he had no other livelihood. After rejoining in January, my son was sent to the frontline. He wanted to come home on leave in May but instead he came in a sealed coffin in April. After Sisirakumara joined the army, one of his elder brothers also wanted to sign up. But Sisirakumara warned him against joining, saying it was too risky."

Sisirakumara was married and had a four-year-old daughter. His wife left for Bahrain three months ago to work as a housemaid and was unable to attend the funeral.

People in Kohombawatta and nearby villages live in dire poverty. Many villagers work as day labourers on large coconut estates or in coconut mills for 250 rupees ($US2.30) and 300 rupees a day respectively. Kusumawathie looked after her sons by working as a day labourer and doing other odd jobs.

Sisirakumar's brother Upali worked as a mason repairing roads in the North while the 2002 ceasefire held. He explained: "Because of the war, people in the North have become helpless and very poor. They were friendly to us when we worked there. They don't want war. Sinhalese politicians have done many injustices to these people. The pain in the mind of Tamils cannot be defeated by a war. We are also living in an intolerable situation due to the high price of essentials. War will not solve these problems."

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