

Sri Lankan soldiers and their families speak to the WSWs

Our correspondents
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Fierce fighting between the army and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in recent weeks in northern Sri Lanka has led to scores, if not hundreds, of deaths and many more injured on both sides.

The current military offensives have centred on capturing Kilinochchi, the LTTE's military and administrative headquarters, in the northern Wanni region. The Sri Lankan government was intent on seizing the town prior to yesterday's annual "Heroes' Day" address by LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran.

As a result, the loss of life has been high. After three days of intense battles, including mortar and artillery barrages, the military claimed to have killed 122 rebels and lost 27 soldiers. Both sides routinely falsify casualty figures.

Prabhakaran declared in his speech that the current military offensives are "neither novel, nor huge" and offered to reopen peace talks. Despite the boasting, however, the LTTE has suffered substantial losses since President Mahinda Rajapakse restarted the island's civil war in mid-2006. The LTTE has lost all of its strongholds in the East and about half of its territory in the Wanni. In the past fortnight, the army has captured two strategically important towns—Pooneryn and Mankulam—and is now pressing Kilinochchi on three sides.

Rajapakse's renewal of the communal war has been accompanied by a campaign of intimidation designed to muzzle any criticism of the government. No independent reporting from the war zones is permitted. The government's efforts to whip up patriotic fervour

are designed to drown out widespread discontent over war and its economic burdens—including in the ranks of the military.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) spoke to a number of soldiers and their family members over the past two weeks about the war and its impact. Their names have been withheld to protect them from possible victimisation and reprisals by the military and associated chauvinist thugs.

The actual number of army casualties is likely to be far higher than the government or military spokesmen acknowledge. The WSWs found out from its sources at four hospitals—the National Hospital, a military hospital, and the Colombo South and Jayawardanapura hospitals—that about 200, 400, 60 and 200 patients respectively are injured soldiers. These hospitals are in and around the capital of Colombo.

At one hospital, our reporters saw 20 soldiers—some without legs and others without hands. Some had lost their sight and others their hearing. Many of them had been engaged in the fighting for Kilinochchi. Most were reluctant to talk, but one soldier gave a glimpse of the ferocity of the battles.

"We can't say what the final outcome of the war will be. The LTTE has been weakened, but they are still able to attack. A group [of soldiers] came towards us smiling. We thought they were our colleagues, but suddenly they attacked us. Several of us were killed and I was among the injured. Many will die or be injured. Many will join the queues of disabled," he told the WSWs.

Our reporters spoke to a family member of a dead soldier who used to live near Bandarawella. He was just 21-years-old when he was killed in fighting early last month. Most soldiers are economic conscripts—young men and women, mainly from rural Sinhala areas, who have joined the military because of the lack of jobs and educational opportunities.

The dead soldier was the only son in the family and had two younger sisters. One is married and other one is still studying at grade 10 level. His father had heart problems but works as a driver because of the family's economic difficulties. The soldier's mother explained that she had only agreed to him joining the army reluctantly. She said he had told her: "Do not worry mother we will not be put straight into the battle."

"Several army officials came and asked us to sign some forms. My son only finished his training and passed out July 5. He had been involved in military operations for only a few months. Now our child is lost because of this war. Though they promised to pay his salary nothing has happened. We received 100,000 rupees [less than \$US1,000] for the funeral.

"All this happened because of our poverty. We were able to build just two rooms of this house from the earnings of my husband. What can we do now? My son told us with his salary we could start to build from next January. If he didn't join the military, we would have built the house somehow. I do not know how we will live without him."

A neighbour summed up his disgust with the government and the war: "The war is for their survival. What has happened in the East? Now it is being given to Pillayan!" Following the army's "liberation" of the eastern province, the government has installed S. Chandrakanthan, also known as Pillayan and head of a notorious paramilitary outfit, as chief minister.

WSWS reporters also spoke to the family members of a young soldier from Ambalangoda who was killed in northern Killali this month. He joined the military in mid-2004 and had already been wounded once. He died on the day he had promised to come home. His mother was heart broken. "How can I bear this sorrow?" she

exclaimed.

His father said eight soldiers were killed along with his son. His brother, who is also in the security forces, said that he had 10 days leave to attend the funeral. He said he had flown from the north in a plane carrying 20 injured soldiers and two more bodies. Every day injured soldiers and bodies are flown from Palaly airport on the northern Jaffna peninsula to Colombo.

The family is poor. His father is a carpenter, but unable to work because of poor eyesight. He was urging his remaining son to find a way of transferring out of the war zones.

Thousands of soldiers have deserted the military as a result of harsh conditions and abuse. One young soldier, 22, who joined the military in February 2007, fled because his officers refused to approve the leave for his marriage.

The military police raided his home early in the morning on September 14 and detained him at the Boossa detention camp. When his wife visited she was only allowed four minutes to speak to him. She is four months pregnant and is now staying with her brother at Kurunagala because she has no means to live. It is a tiny house—one room, a veranda and a kitchen.

Her husband is now being held at the Kuruwita camp, about 75 kilometres from Colombo, with 120 other deserters. He has managed to speak to his father and told him to tell his cousin not to join the military. Like so many others, the family is very poor. His mother left him when he was a small child. His father had little work. He quit school after grade four, then joined the army.



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