

Thousands of Sri Lankan soldiers perish in northern offensive

Our reporters
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The Sri Lankan government's ongoing military offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has not only created a massive humanitarian crisis in the northern Wanni area, where UN agencies have warned that least 250,000 Tamil civilians are trapped without shelter or adequate food.

Thousands of Sri Lankan soldiers, nearly all of them poverty-stricken rural youth, have also been killed on the front lines. Desperate to win the war, the government and the military have recruited tens of thousands of jobless young men and sent them to fight and die on the front after only three to four months training.

Just as the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has sought to hide the civilian casualties, it has also covered up the soldiers' death toll. Last October, the defence ministry stopped giving casualty figures for soldiers, citing "security reasons".

Last month, a *Sunday Island* reporter asked government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella about a claim by the opposition United National Party (UNP) that 15,000 soldiers had been killed in three months. While seeking to deny that so many had died, Rambukwella declared: "According to our estimates, around 3,000 soldiers have been killed in action since October 2008."

Even if the lesser figure is true, the deaths of so many young soldiers in just three months—in a country of around 20 million people—is a shocking statistic. The high casualty rate shows the government's utter disregard for human life, including those of the Sinhala poor that it claims to represent, and points to a devastating social impact of the war on families across the island.

A few days after Rambukwella's statement, a military spokesman, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara, told reporters that 3,700 troops had been killed in fighting over the past three years, while the LTTE had lost 13,000. The brigadier's estimate appears to have been produced hastily in order to downplay the military's casualties.

However, soldiers' coffins have been arriving at homes

around the country. While the government routinely describes the dead soldiers as "war heroes," their families are suffering deeply, having lost loved ones and bread winners.

Last week, WSWs correspondents visited the families and friends of some soldiers killed on the battlefield. Most of the young men came from rural areas and joined the armed forces because of abject poverty and unemployment. Many had told their families, on their visit home: "This may be the last time I see you."

The funeral of Corporal G. Dinesh Priyankara Perera, 25, who was killed at the Muhamalai front, was held in Panadura, 27 kilometres south of Colombo, on January 10. His obituary described him as a "son of the golden land".

Perera's mother and sister told the WSWs he had joined the army without informing his parents, worried that they might oppose his decision. In 2006, after four months training at the Boossa camp in southern Sri Lanka, he was sent straight to the war front. His parents pleaded with him not to go, offering to sell their house to raise the bond money to secure his release from the army, but he did not agree.

The family lives in a small, unplastered house. Perera's mother is unemployed and his father has lost his job. Two sisters are married, leaving no other income for the family.

His mother said: "Our house has been mortgaged. My son sent 10,000 rupees (about \$US90) every month to pay the bank. He wanted to build a home for his sister who has no house." She continued tearfully: "He was like a father to us. He gave 40,000 rupees to his elder sister to repair the roof of her house. Now we have no way to live."

She added: "I lost my son because of this war. One soldier who came to his funeral promised me to visit us often. But after a week he lost his leg. We do not know what to do, except pray for them."

Perera had contacted home by phone for the last time on January 5. At that time he was in a bunker. His mother said: "Our son did not say anything about the war front because it is prohibited."

When the police came to Perera's home to inform the family of his death, they had a list of 10 names with them.

One of Perera's relatives commented: "On the same day, 10 coffins of soldiers were brought to the Panadura area, it seems."

Another soldier, Janaka, from the Badulla district, was seriously wounded on December 10 in the battle for Kilinochchi, the LTTE's former administrative capital. He was admitted to hospital in Galle, in the southern province, but died from his injuries on January 8.

Janaka was married. Both he and his wife lived with his mother and two sisters in a small single-room house built with clay. One sister is 17-years-old and other 19. According to family members, once Janaka was injured he received no wages.

Another soldier, Madusanka Ruwan was injured in the battle for Mullaithivu and brought home on January 27. Family members told the WSW: "This government is pushing the youth to death, saying they will protect the country and the nation." Ruwan's sister added: "My brother joined the army as we have no other way to live. We don't have land to cultivate. The government is spending large amounts of money on the war. We don't like this war."

Charith Priyanka who lived in Gampola, near Kandy, died on January 21 at the Kilinochchi battlefield. His story was similar. During a visit home two months earlier, he had told his family and friends that the war was "very difficult" and he was not sure that he would return from it alive.

There was speculation among soldiers' families that the real casualty figure is higher than the government has admitted. According to some reports, in order to hide the true situation, the government has not sent all the dead bodies to their homes.

Thousands more soldiers have deserted the army to escape the slaughter, forcing the government to offer an amnesty for deserters on February 4, which is Independence Day.

A deserter from the Puttalam district explained: "I joined the (army) volunteer force three years ago. I deserted because a large number of soldiers were killed. Our job as volunteers was to protect captured lands. But because of the shortage of soldiers, higher officials sent some of our members to the war front. So I fled the army."

He continued: "My father is sick and can't do any work. I have two daughters. One is eight and other one is four years. My wife is again expecting a child. We don't have our own home, and we are living in relatives' homes. I have been living in hiding because the police may arrest me."

"Before joining the army I was a fisherman. Now I cannot fish and I have no other job, so I have decided to go back to the army."

On January 9, the *Colombo Page* reported on the imprisonment of army deserters. Commissioner-General of Prisons, Major General Wajira Wijegunawardana, told the

media that 2,500 deserters were in prison after being tried by military courts. Another 4,000 were still to be tried. Only 3,000 had returned in response to an amnesty granted by the army. Those who returned had been sent back to the front.

An officer told the WSW about a camp where deserters were kept. "In our camp in Colombo I spent two weeks guarding a small room in which 80 deserters were all packed on the floor together. They were allowed to dress only in shorts.

"They are being given only one rice meal a day and two slices of bread in the morning and at night with one vegetable and lentil. They all had to use one bad smelling toilet. What a torture they are suffering. After 40 days they will be court-martialled and sent to prison for a long time. There are several thousand such prisoners at the Welikada Prison [in Colombo]."

Despite the escalating toll among soldiers, as well as civilians, the government has declared there will be no let up in the military offensive. Last Friday, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse rejected calls for a "humanitarian ceasefire" after the UN and International Committee of the Red Cross reported that hundreds of Tamil civilians were dead, thousands had been injured by artillery attacks and a humanitarian disaster was looming for a quarter of a million civilians trapped by the conflict.



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