

Halt the war crimes in Sri Lanka

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The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka denounces the terrible crimes now being perpetrated by the government against the Tamil population in the north of the island. The reactionary communal character of the country's 26-year civil war finds expression in the army's criminal indifference for the lives of Tamil civilians as it stamps out the remaining pockets of resistance by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

President Mahinda Rajapakse has declared that the army is engaged in the "world's biggest hostage rescue" and hailed the stream of refugees out of LTTE-held territory as "a massive vote for freedom". What the thousands of people are fleeing, however, are conditions of starvation, lack of medical care and indiscriminate bombardment, which the government has deliberately created in its self-declared "no-fire zone".

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led government has attempted to hide its crimes behind a media blackout, but nothing can disguise the consequences of its offensive. UN spokesperson Marie Okabe declared yesterday that "significant numbers have been killed and injured in the military operation" and warned of worse to come. Hundreds have died over the past three days alone. The International Committee of the Red Cross has predicted "a catastrophe" if the fighting is not halted.

The physical state of the refugees speaks for itself. Many are emaciated and sick after months without adequate food, shelter and medical care. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that Vavuniya hospital was filled to overflowing with hundreds of injured civilians from the war zone—mostly with shrapnel wounds from

army shelling. Scores died before they could be treated. These are the victims of the army's siege warfare.

Far from the final onslaught being an act of liberation, the military is herding civilians into squalid detention camps surrounded by razor wire and armed guards. They are being treated as prisoners of war, not refugees. Rajapakse's "war on terrorism" is a war to entrench the political power and privileges of the Sinhala ruling elite. In this conflict, the country's Tamil minority as a whole is regarded as the enemy.

As in the island's "liberated" eastern province, what is being prepared in the north is a permanent military occupation. Despite the country's worsening economic crisis, the government insists that there will be no reduction in the military budget. "Even if the war is over, the current security system is expected to be there for a foreseeable time," Deputy Finance Minister Ranjith Siyambalapitiya told the media last week.

The huge security apparatus that has been built up over a quarter century of civil war is not being maintained just to suppress the democratic rights of Tamils. Having destroyed the LTTE's military capacity, the government is preparing for a broad onslaught on the living standards of the entire working class. Teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, the government is currently engaged in negotiating its largest ever IMF loan. It will utilise police-state measures against workers, peasants and youth seeking to defend their rights and conditions.

This is the real meaning of the atmosphere of jingoistic jubilation being whipped up by the political and media establishment in Colombo over the army's victories against the LTTE. Over the past three years, the Rajapakse government has repeatedly accused

striking workers and protesting students of being accomplices of the “Tiger terrorists”. Having been strengthened by the defeat of the LTTE, the most reactionary sections of the ruling elite will soon be calling for the crushing of the new enemy—the working class.

The entire history of independence since 1948 stands as an indictment of every section of the ruling class, which has proven utterly incapable of meeting the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people. From its very origins, the war has been bound up with the class struggle. At every point of crisis, the weak Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism as the means of dividing the working class and shoring up its hold on power. The war was launched in 1983 by a United National Party government amid a horrific wave of anti-Tamil pogroms. These were being carried out in response to a growing rebellion by the working class against the impact of the government’s free market agenda.

The LTTE’s impending defeat is primarily a political, not a military question. Its perspective of a separate capitalist state of Eelam has proven to be a deadly trap for the Tamil people. Its sectarian outlook and attacks on Sinhalese civilians has only deepened the communal divide and played into the hands of the Sinhala extremists in Colombo.

The LTTE’s plans for a separate state represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the Tamil masses, and always depended in the final analysis on the support of one or other of the imperialist powers. With its remaining fighters surrounded, the LTTE is reduced to making futile appeals to the “international community” to pressure the Sri Lankan government for a ceasefire.

The UN Security Council is due to meet today to discuss the Sri Lankan crisis. Outside of cynical hand wringing over the plight of Tamil refugees, no steps will be taken to condemn the Rajapakse government and demand an immediate end to the fighting. All the major powers, with the United States in the lead, have backed Rajapakse’s war and turned a blind eye to his government’s flagrant abuses of democratic rights. If

the US is now raising concerns, it is only because instability in Sri Lanka threatens broader American economic and strategic interests in South Asia.

The only social force capable of halting the war and defending the rights of Tamils is the working class. The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka calls on workers and youth to demand an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East of the island. That demand must become the rallying point to unite the working class—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—against the Rajapakse government and its reactionary policies. The struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist policies—a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam—would become a powerful pole of attraction for workers throughout the region and internationally whose democratic rights and living standards are also under attack.

The terrible atrocities being carried out in Sri Lanka are a warning to working people everywhere. As capitalism plunges into its worst economic crisis since the 1930s, the ruling elites around the world are reaching into the tool bag of political reaction to secure their rule. Anti-Tamil chauvinism in Sri Lanka finds its parallels in anti-immigrant xenophobia, national jingoism and numerous forms of chauvinism based on religious, ethnic and linguistic divisions. These can also become the starting point for local and international wars. The only alternative to such barbarism is the struggle for world socialism by the international working class.



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