

Thousands of soldiers perished in Sri Lankan war

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For the first time last week, Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse revealed the staggering level of casualties suffered by government soldiers in the last phase of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Speaking on the state-owned ITN television channel, Rajapakse acknowledged that 6,261 members of the security forces had died and another 29,551 had been injured since the government resumed the communal war in July 2006. Of the injured, 2,556 had been permanently disabled.

The military stopped releasing casualty figures last October as it escalated its offensive in the North against the LTTE stronghold of Kilinochchi. While "security reasons" were cited for the decision, the real reason was the fear in government circles that the rising death toll would fuel widespread popular anger against the war as well as discontent in the ranks of the army.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, Gotabhaya's brother, imposed de facto censorship on every aspect of the war, banning journalists from the front lines. The government and the military lied repeatedly about the number of civilian deaths caused by its indiscriminate bombardment of LTTE-held territory. The UN estimates that 7,000 civilians were killed and another 16,781 injured from January 20 to May 7.

The government released the military's casualty figures as part of its "victory" celebrations since the final crushing of LTTE resistance on May 19. Over the past nine days, there has been one flag-waving ceremony after another as President Rajapakse,

government ministers and military chiefs have sought to capitalise on the LTTE's defeat and drown out any criticism.

A focus of this campaign, echoed throughout the media, has been the incessant hailing of the "war heroes" who gave their lives for the Sinhala Buddhist state. Writing in the *Sunday Lankima* last weekend, Professor Kulatunga, for instance, declared that the heroes had certainly gone to the Buddhist heaven. "It is a concept of northern Bharth that soldiers who died on the field of battle reached at that very moment the *swarga* [the heavenly abode] which the sages of old took aeons of penance to achieve," he wrote.

The showering of praise on dead soldiers hides the grim reality that most of those who joined the armed forces were driven by economic necessity. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), youth unemployment in Sri Lanka is 22.4 percent. Among rural youth, the jobless rate is much higher. To escape poverty and help their families, men and women as young as 18 joined the armed forces. Many of the new recruits were flung into battle after just three months' training.

During the past year alone, the army recruited about 80,000 youth, boosting its numbers to 200,000, according to army chief General Sarath Fonseka. Speaking to the Colombo-based *Nation* on Sunday, General Fonseka justified the secrecy surrounding the war by saying: "If 80,000 did not join the Army, this war would not have been possible. News that discourages those aspiring to join the Army would jeopardise our recruitment drive." He admitted that so desperate was the need for soldiers that the military had

sent those with “minor injuries” back to the front lines.

The military’s casualty figures are high by any standard. In its occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military has lost 4,301 soldiers and 690 soldiers respectively. On a comparative basis, the loss of 6,000 soldiers in Sri Lanka with its population of 20 million would be equivalent to the deaths of 92,000 soldiers in the US with its population of 306 million.

Overall, the war, which began in 1983 after the outbreak of deadly anti-Tamil pogroms, has had a devastating impact on the lives of working people. Last week the UN estimated the death toll for the 26 years of war at between 80,000 and 100,000. Many more have been maimed and injured. Hundreds of thousands have been left homeless. Nearly 300,000 civilians who fled the war zone in recent weeks are being held in military-run detention centres.

Over the past three years, the Rajapakse government has squandered 602 billion rupees or about \$US6 billion on the war—equivalent to 14 percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2008. Far from there being any reduction, General Fonseka told ITN on Monday that the army would be expanded by 50 percent. “Our strength is 200,000 and it will become 300,000 soon... We like to see young men joining us more quickly. We don’t mind enlisting even 10,000 a month; we need a lot more soldiers to reach our goal.”

This huge army, one of the largest per capita in the world, will be used for a military occupation of the North and East of the island, primarily directed against the Tamil population. “It will not be easy for them to build up a terror group as they did before,” Fonseka told ITN. The expansion of the military underscores the communal nature of the conflict. Far from being a “war on terrorism,” the protracted civil war was to entrench the power and privileges of the island’s Sinhala elites, which have exploited anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide working people along ethnic lines.

The massive police-state apparatus built up in the course of the war will also be used to suppress any political opposition as the government attempts to make the working class pay for the cost of the war. Already

Rajapakse and his ministers are telling workers that they should emulate the spirit of sacrifice shown by the “war heroes”. Dragooned into the army and used as cannon fodder in the government’s criminal war, the dead soldiers are being cynically exploited to impose new economic burdens on their families and working people more generally.



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