Sri Lanka: Permanent military occupation of the North and East

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In an official gazette notification earlier this month, President Mahinda Rajapakse declared that the extensive network of army camps established during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will be made permanent. This indefinite military occupation of the northern and eastern provinces is aimed at the forcible suppression of the basic democratic rights not only of Tamils but of all working people.

The number of army camps in these two provinces, which have a population of about 3 million, has increased to 147. Two of the LTTE's former strongholds—Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu—will become security force headquarters and permanent forward maintenance areas. Apart from the new military camps, at least a dozen new police stations will be established in the northern Wanni area captured from the LTTE.

Rajapakse claimed that his renewed war against the LTTE from mid-2006 was to "liberate" the Tamil people from the "clutches of terrorism". The defeat of the LTTE last May has only brought a further trampling on democratic rights throughout the island. In the North and East, the permanent presence of the army means not just military camps but roadblocks, checkpoints and patrols and the systematic surveillance, harassment and intimidation of the local Tamil population.

Most of the population of former LTTE-held territories in the Wanni fled as the Sri Lankan army advanced. Towns and villages were devastated by the indiscriminate use of artillery and aerial bombardment. In the final months of fighting, more than a quarter of a million civilians were trapped in a small pocket of LTTE territory. A UN estimate puts the civilian death toll as more than 7,000 for the period from January to May 2009.

After the collapse of the LTTE resistance, the army herded 280,000 men, women and children into military-run "welfare villages" surrounded by barbed wire and heavily armed soldiers and operated as prison camps. About 95,000 people are still being held in these detention centres. Those who have been allowed to return to their devastated towns and villages are subject to police restrictions and have been given little aid.

As well as acquiring land for the new army camps, the government is planning to establish large high security zones (HSZ) around important installations such as the new headquarters in Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu. Such areas are out of bounds for civilians and have previously resulted in the forced displacement of residents.

After the LTTE's defeat in eastern province, the army established a HSZ in the Sampur area and prevented thousands of people from returning to their homes, farms and businesses. The government later declared a portion of the Sampur HSZ to be a Special Economic Zone, offering military protection to investors. In the northern Jaffna Peninsula, 15 high security zones have been established since the 1990s, covering 160 square kilometres or 18 percent of the peninsula's land mass. Around 130,000 people have been unable to return to their homes as a result.

The government is currently detaining thousands of young Tamils without trial as "LTTE suspects" at unknown locations. Now it has announced plans to use these detainees as a cheap labour force under a program

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initiated by Justice Minister Milinda Moragoda to "rehabilitate" alleged LTTE cadres.

The *Island* reported on March 13 that more than 10,000 LTTE suspects will be "settled" in various prison labour camps including in the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Jaffna. One of the army's "welfare villages"—Zone 5 of the huge Manik Farm camp near Vavuniya—will also be used.

According to the Justice Ministry, the spouses and children of LTTE cadres will be free to move in and out of the camps, but the detainees will be subject to strict security measures to ensure the "smooth functioning of the facilities."

The government has already announced the establishment of a dairy farm at Suriyawewa near Trincomalee, involving about 500 former "LTTE cadres." Ceylon Cold Stores, a large company manufacturing beverages and milk products, will invest in the project, but the army will be in charge.

The *Island* reported: "One of the most important aspects of the government initiative is to set up agricultural/livestock farms at Kandalkadu, Thrikonamadu which would be vested with the Sri Lanka army and air force. There would be six separate farms with each capable of accommodating 500 ex-LTTE combatants each, sources said, adding that about 11,000 acres would be allocated for this project."

The involvement of the army and air force in these projects points to the further militarisation of all aspects of life in Sri Lanka, including the economy. Far from there being any demobilisation, the country's huge military—one of the largest per capita in the world—is being kept in place and entrenched as a permanent feature, particularly in the North and East.

The government has also maintained all of the police state measures built up over a quarter century of war, including the state of emergency that gives the president extensive powers to detain people without trial, censor the media and ban industrial action. This apparatus is being kept in place not just to suppress the country's Tamil minority but the working class as the Rajapakse government prepares to impose far-reaching austerity measures after the April 8 parliamentary election.

The SEP is standing candidates in the election to begin to mobilise working people in defence of their living standards and democratic rights. The SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East, the freeing of political prisoners, the dismantling of detention camps and the repeal of all repressive laws. A fight for these demands is necessary to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government based on socialist policies.

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