

Sri Lanka: One year after the LTTE's defeat

Wije Dias
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One year ago today, the Sri Lankan military completed its seizure of the last scrap of land held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, with the massacre of all the top LTTE leaders—some of whom were attempting to surrender. It was the final act of a criminal war that had been prosecuted ruthlessly by successive Colombo governments for a quarter century to suppress the democratic rights of the island's Tamil minority and divide the working class.

In the last months of the war, the army drove the LTTE fighters and more than 300,000 civilians into a tiny pocket of land on the north-east coast and pounded it relentlessly with artillery and from the air. At the time, the UN put the civilian death toll inside the government-proclaimed “no fire zone” at 7,000. A report released yesterday by the International Crisis Group estimated the figure at “tens of thousands of Tamil civilian men, women and children and the elderly killed, countless more wounded, and hundreds of thousands deprived of adequate food and medical care, resulting in more deaths”.

The survivors were herded into “welfare villages”—military-run prison camps surrounded by barbed wire and heavily armed soldiers. Thousands of young Tamils—men and women—were picked out by military interrogators and informants as “terrorist suspects” and dispatched to “retraining centres,” where most are still being held. Tens of thousands of civilians also remain in the detention camps. Those who have been released have been returned to a bigger prison—the permanent military occupation of the North and East of the island.

President Mahinda Rajapakse and his ministers flatly deny that any war crimes took place and denounce any, even limited, criticism as being part of an “international

conspiracy”. The government has given over this week to elaborate “victory” celebrations, culminating on Thursday with a massive military parade. It is a regime built on lies and communalism enforced by a huge police-state apparatus aimed at intimidating and suppressing any opposition.

The end of fighting has not brought the “peace and prosperity” that President Rajapakse promised in the days following the LTTE's defeat. The war itself was always primarily directed against the working class—it erupted in 1983 after decades of official anti-Tamil discrimination aimed at pitting Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala workers against each other. After defeating the LTTE, Rajapakse proclaimed a new “economic war” to “build the nation” that is likewise aimed against the working class.

Notwithstanding Rajapakse's pipedream of transforming the island into a new Asian miracle, Sri Lanka is in deep economic crisis. The end of the war coincided with the worst global financial turmoil since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The huge public debt resulting from years of massive military spending came together with a sharp downturn in all exports. Like a man quenching his thirst with salt water, the government took out an International Monetary Fund loan of \$US2.6 billion to ward off a balance of payments crisis.

Now as the second stage of the global economic breakdown erupts in the form of a sovereign debt crisis centred in Greece and Europe, governments around the world are imposing the burden onto working people by slashing public spending, selling off state assets and increasing taxes. The IMF is insisting that Sri Lanka halve its budget deficit to 5 percent of GDP by the end of next year. Rajapakse's “economic war” against the

working class will be waged with the same repressive methods that were used against the Tamil minority.

This week's celebration of the military and militarism serves as an ominous warning to working people. Far from being demobilised, the armed forces are being boosted in size. The government continues to maintain a state of emergency that gives the president extraordinary powers, including to ban virtually all industrial action. Rajapakse has not hesitated to use such measures against workers who have fought to defend their living standards against rising prices and unemployment. Last November he outlawed industrial action by port, petroleum, water and power workers seeking pay rises.

Now that the presidential election in January and last month's parliamentary election are out of the way, the Rajapakse government is preparing to escalate its economic assault. The first target has been the most vulnerable layers of the urban poor—shanty dwellers and hawkers in central Colombo. Two weekends ago, police and soldiers forced 45 families out of their homes, which were destroyed to clear the way for property developers to make their profits. This, however, is just a preliminary skirmish in the class battles that are certain to erupt in the months ahead.

Definite conclusions should be drawn. The government that carried out mass murder of Tamil civilians last year will not hesitate to use the full force of the state apparatus against the working class. While opposition politicians and journalists have been arrested and in some cases murdered, the opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have failed to defend democratic rights. These parties have no fundamental differences with the government. The right-wing UNP started and prosecuted the war for over a decade while the Sinhala chauvinist JVP was one of its most ferocious advocates. Both parties agree with Rajapakse's pro-market economic agenda. As for the trade unions, all of them—government and opposition alike—have helped to contain and suppress the opposition and anger of workers.

The past year has also confirmed the bankruptcy of

Tamil separatism. The LTTE's defeat stemmed from its political program, based on the communal demand for a separate capitalist state of Eelam in the North and East of the island. Organically incapable of making any appeal to the working class, either in Sri Lanka or internationally, the LTTE leadership spent its final days making impotent calls for help from the “international community” that had backed Rajapakse's war. Since last May, the LTTE's mouthpiece—the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—has spent its time ingratiating itself to one or other section of the Colombo political establishment. One faction joined the Rajapakse government, while the remainder of the TNA backed opposition candidate Sarath Fonseka—the general responsible for ruthlessly waging Rajapakse's war—in January's presidential election.

There are broad lessons for the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. The savage austerity measures being demanded of governments around the world by global finance capital cannot be imposed peacefully or democratically. As resistance and opposition grow, the police-state methods on display in Sri Lanka will become increasingly common. The working class can defeat these attacks only by mobilising independently of all factions of the ruling elite on the basis of a socialist program to meet the needs of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few. Such a movement can be built only through the rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism. In Sri Lanka that means the unification of Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers in the common struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally. That is the program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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