

Sri Lankan government holds victory celebrations

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse presided over celebrations last Friday to mark one year since the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May. His speech combined militarist triumphalism and a whitewash of his government's war crimes with another call to working people to "sacrifice" to build the nation.

The nationally-televised event was delayed for a month due to heavy flooding in the capital. The military pageant involved the mobilisation of around 9,000 personnel from the army, air force and the navy on Galle Face Green in central Colombo. On display was the huge military machine built up in a quarter century of civil war—artillery, tanks and multi-barrel rocket launchers; warplanes and helicopters overhead; and warships off the coast.

The government declared a public holiday on Friday, but few civilians were allowed to attend the official celebrations. The invitees were foreign diplomats, ministers, parliamentarians and government officials. Ordinary people, who are facing deepening attacks on living standards and democratic rights, displayed little interest in the event.

The government confronts continuing international criticism over the atrocities carried out by the Sri Lankan military, particularly in the final months of the war. Once again Rajapakse flatly denied that the army had been responsible for any civilian deaths, blaming all casualties on the LTTE.

The president absurdly declared: "Our armed forces comprise those who went to battle carrying a gun in one hand, the Declaration of Human Rights in the

other, as well as taking food for the liberated people of the north and full of human kindness in their hearts. Our guns were not fired at a single civilian." He whitewashed his ruthless war as "a great humanitarian operation only to eliminate terrorism".

Rajapakse restarted the communal war in 2006, openly breaching an internationally-recognised ceasefire, in order to ensure the political domination of the island's Sinhala elites. In the final months of the war, the military mercilessly bombarded the small pocket of remaining LTTE-territory in which more than 300,000 Tamil civilians were crammed. An International Crisis Group report last month estimated that between 30,000 and 75,000 civilians had been killed, and accused the Sri Lankan military of deliberately targetting hospitals and aid supplies.

Following the collapse of the LTTE, the army herded a quarter of a million civilians, many of whom were emaciated, sick or injured, into military-run detention centres where they were held for months. Tens of thousands are still in these camps. Many who have been "resettled" are living in makeshift shelters without jobs and little government assistance. The army is entrenching itself as a permanent occupation force in the war-ravaged North and East of the island.

Under international pressure, the government has announced a "Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission". Like previous human rights investigations, it is certain to be a whitewash. Rajapakse has bitterly opposed any international inquiry, not matter how limited, including a proposal by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to establish an international commission.

UN Under Secretary of Secretary General Lyn Pascoe, who is responsible for human rights issues, visited Colombo last week. On Friday, just hours before the victory parade, he announced that a UN commission of experts would be appointed soon to examine humanitarian and human rights violations during the conflict. The announcement came under heavy criticism in the Colombo press. The *Sunday Times* declared that the government had failed to avert “a major diplomatic disaster for Sri Lanka”.

In recent weeks, the Rajapakse government has been engaged in diplomatic manoeuvres to block any UN inquiry. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister G. L. Peiris visited the US last month in an effort to convince UN Secretary General Ban not to appoint an expert commission and to enlist the support of the Obama administration. Washington has exploited the human rights issue as a means of boosting its influence in Colombo and sidelining rival China, which provided substantial financial and military support for Rajapakse’s war.

Two senior Obama officials were in Colombo last week—Samantha Power, Special Assistant to the President on Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, and David Pressman, National Security Council Director for War Crimes and Atrocities. With the White House having already welcomed the government’s phoney inquiry, the visit’s main purpose appears to have been to advise Rajapakse on how to make it more credible by collaborating with the UN, while at the same time cementing closer ties between Washington and Colombo.

While the bulk of Rajapakse’s speech last Friday was devoted to hailing the victory over the LTTE, he used the occasion to again demand “sacrifice” from ordinary working people to rebuild the nation. He specifically targeted public servants. “More than 200,000 in our armed forces have given Sri Lanka a victory through their commitment through day and night in good weather and bad,” he declared. “If our public servants make a commitment for four years similar to that by our heroic forces we will be able make this country the Wonder of Asia.”

Far from being a new Asian wonder, Sri Lanka is confronting a deepening economic crisis. The country is heavily indebted as a result of Rajapakse’s huge military spending and its exports have been hit hard by the global financial downturn. In expenditure allocations presented this month to parliament, Rajapakse maintained last year’s high levels of defence spending despite the end of fighting.

The government is now under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to slash the budget deficit from nearly 10 percent of GDP last year to 5 percent by the end of next year. In the budget due next week, Rajapakse will be compelled to impose harsh measures to meet the IMF’s requirements—including drastic cuts to public sector jobs and wages, the slashing of essential services and the imposition of higher taxes.

In a hint that the government might not meet the IMF’s conditions, Rajapakse said the government was “not ready to accept aid under conditions that will betray the freedom of our land and people. We must be ready to end the era of dependence on aid.” In that event, as he made clear, the burden would also fall on working people. “We went to battle under the slogan, *Api Wenuwen Api* (We are for ourselves),” he declared. “Similarly, in building the nation and country we must line up under the slogan, ‘We for the Country’.”

Despite Rajapakse’s patriotic exhortations, there is growing discontent among ordinary working people who believed that the end of the war would lead to improved living standards and democratic rights, not the reverse. The government is maintaining the country’s huge military and police-state apparatus to suppress the inevitable opposition that will develop as it imposes its austerity measures.



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