

Sri Lankan army commander issues threat against “separatists”

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19 October 2013

On October 16, Sri Lanka’s Army Commander, Lieutenant General Daya Ratnayake bluntly warned that “separatists” would be severely punished if they became politically active. He was speaking to troops at the security forces headquarters in Vavuniya in the northern Vanni district, an area ravaged by the island’s protracted civil war.

The target of the army commander was not just the remnants of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated in 2009. Rather, he was threatening working people as a whole—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike—as hostility grows to the government’s austerity program.

Ratnayake declared: “Our message to the society is that anyone can live in a democratic society within the framework of democracy but if anyone attempts to step outside the boundaries of democracy and become an extremist and separate the country, the only thing that will be separated is their heads from their bodies.”

The army commander added that some groups, buoyed by the victory of the “Tamil party” (TNA, the Tamil National Alliance) in last month’s Northern Provincial elections, thought the result was a mandate for a separate state and attempts were being made to separate the country once again.

Ratnayake’s comments are a warning that the military will not tolerate any opposition to its continued occupation of the North. The so-called democracy to which Lieutenant General Daya Ratnayake referred is a farce. The military occupation of the Northern Province dominates every aspect of life of the people. According to the military, there are 40,000 troops in the North, but other estimates put the figure far higher.

The TNA, the main Tamil bourgeois party, won more than two-thirds of the seats in the northern provincial council election held on September 21. However,

working people voted for the TNA not because they have any faith in it, but to voice their hostility to President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government, which restarted the communal war in 2006.

The TNA acted as the LTTE’s parliamentary mouthpiece until its defeat. Since 2009 the TNA has sought a political accommodation with the Rajapakse government. It plans to use its control of the Northern Provincial council to bargain for a power-sharing arrangement to benefit the Tamil elites.

Election monitoring groups, including international observers, accused the military of helping the candidates of Rajapakse’s ruling coalition, the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA). However, working people overwhelmingly rejected the UPFA. The army commander complained of voters’ ingratitude for the development assistance that the government and the army had provided for the Northern Province.

The government’s so-called development program is not to help working people, but consists of infrastructure projects aimed at attracting foreign and local investors. The army commander’s naked threat against “separatists” reflects the nervousness within the country’s ruling elite about the seething discontent among working people over their worsening living conditions.

Lieutenant General Daya Ratnayake underlined his warning by declaring that the whole world had seen how Sri Lanka dealt with those who sought to divide the country. He particularly referred to the fate of LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran, who, along with other senior LTTE figures, was slaughtered by the army in the final days of fighting. Some were unarmed and surrendering.

The government and the military routinely deny that

the army was responsible for war crimes. However, a UN expert committee estimated that the military was responsible for the deaths of at least 40,000 Tamils, mainly civilians, in the final months of the war, as well as other gross human rights abuses.

After making his chilling threats, Ratnayake, in an effort to cover himself, cynically declared: “Strict action will be taken against any soldier who breaks the Army’s code of conduct.” In fact, no one has been held accountable for the army’s war crimes, or the hundreds of civilians murdered by military-backed death squads.

The army commander was referring to a disciplinary inquiry against several officers who led a recent army crackdown on innocent protesters at Weliweriya near Colombo that resulted in three deaths. Locals were demanding clean water and alleged that a major factory was responsible for contaminating local water.

The inquiry, like every other previous investigation, will be a whitewash. The officers involved are simply convenient scapegoats. What this army operation demonstrated was that the government is now using the military methods developed during the war to suppress the struggles of working people throughout the country.

Lieutenant General Daya Ratnayake’s threats should not be taken lightly. Successive Colombo governments, in league with the military, have a long and bloody record of mass killings to prop up capitalist rule. In 1971, when the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) launched an adventurist uprising, the army killed around 15,000 Sinhala rural youth. In 1988–1990, army-backed death squads murdered at least 60,000 youth in a bid to suppress social unrest in the South.

The army commander’s remarks are in line with the propaganda of the Rajapakse government and Sinhala chauvinist groups who claim that the LTTE is re-emerging. “Though the terrorist organisation was defeated underground members of the organisation and intelligence operatives are still very active, especially overseas, and are trying to create problems in the country again,” he said.

The government and the military are exploiting such claims to whip up communal tensions. Their aim is to divide Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers on ethnic lines in order to prevent a unified movement of the working class against the government’s program of austerity. As the world capitalist crisis impacts on Sri Lanka, the Rajapakse government is making deep

inroads into the living and social conditions of workers and the poor while giving huge concessions to big business and investors.

At the same time it is preparing to use the police-state measures developed over decades of war to crush any resistance by the working class.



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