

Sri Lankan president declares wartime missing persons dead

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Ten years after the end of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has admitted that more than 20,000 missing persons during and after the war are “actually dead.” He was speaking to the UN Resident Coordinator for Sri Lanka Hanna Singer at the Presidential Secretariat on January 17.

It is an extraordinary admission. For years calls by family members for information about their missing relatives have been all but ignored. No Sri Lanka official has previously acknowledged that the government and the military have known all along that the “missing” were dead. To do so would raise too many awkward questions about their deaths. Up until now, Rajapakse has denied that anyone was missing at all.

The obvious question is: How does Rajapakse know about the deaths of these persons? The answer is simple. He was defence secretary—the top post in the defence department—during the final brutal stages of the war against the LTTE. His brother was the executive president as well as defense minister and commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

As such, Gotabhaya Rajapakse was in charge of the huge security forces—more than 300,000 personnel, including military intelligence and the police, as well as the military-linked death squads that engaged in abductions, murders and forced disappearances, mostly of Tamils, as well as government critics and journalists.

Senior police officers and military commanders have been indicted in some of the most notorious cases, including the assassination of government critics, such as *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge and the “disappearance” of Prageeth Eknaligoda, a *Lankaenews* journalist, as well as the abduction and killing of 11 other people including students taken for

ransom.

In his remarks to the UN official, the new president attempted to blame the LTTE for “forcefully conscripting” most of the missing persons. He also said “about 4,000 soldiers are listed as disappeared, but actually they all are dead from the fighting and their bodies are not recovered.”

This is nothing but a cynical attempt to downplay the involvement of the military in the organisation of the notorious death squads operating in white vans that abducted, tortured and killed at the very least hundreds of so-called LTTE suspects. In some cases, military officers sought to extort ransoms from desperate family members.

The “disappearances” were only one aspect of the atrocities over which the Rajapakse brothers presided. The final months of the war were waged with particular savagery. The military indiscriminately bombarded shrinking LTTE-held areas from the air and, using multi-barrel rocket launchers, destroyed basic infrastructure including medical and aid facilities. The military declared that civilian safe zones offered no protection. The UN estimated that 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed.

More than 250,000 Tamil people who survived the final assault were arrested and incarcerated at Vavuniya in military-run “welfare camps” surrounded by barbed wire. The military dragged off hundreds of young men to undisclosed locations for interrogation and “re-education.”

Gotabhaya Rajapakse is directly implicated in war crimes. According to a UN Panel of Experts, former Army Commander General Sarath Fonseka accused Rajapakse of explicitly ordering the summary execution of LTTE leaders and their families whose surrender had been arranged and they were crossing

into military territory carrying white flags. As army commander during the final phase of the war Fonseka can substantiate this accusation.

In a civil court case in California that began in April 2019, Rajapakse is accused of using torture—physical and psychological—to extract a confession from Canadian Tamil citizen Roy Samathanan. He was detained by the Terrorism Investigation Division in Colombo for three years, on baseless charges of aiding the LTTE.

A second case has been brought against Rajapakse on behalf of Ahimsa Wickrematunge, the daughter of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, over his killing in broad daylight in the streets of Colombo.

During the election campaign in November, Rajapakse hailed the military as “war heroes” and declared that he would release all the soldiers detained over various crimes within 24 hours when he won the election.

On Monday, a presidential commission directed the attorney general not to proceed with cases against former navy commander Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda and former navy spokesperson Rear Admiral D.K.P. Dassanayake over the abduction for ransom and disappearance of 11 youth in Colombo in 2008 and 2009.

Rajapakse’s election is a warning to the working class as whole. Sections of the ruling elite in Sri Lanka back Rajapakse as the “strong man” required to impose police-state measures amid a deepening economic crisis and the re-emergence of workers’ struggles. As president, he has already appointed military figures to administer major state institutions.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) demands that those responsible for the disappearances and murders, irrespective of their positions, should be arrested, charged and put on trial. The relatives of the thousands of missing persons have a right to know when, why and how their loved ones were murdered and where their bodies are buried.

The prosecution of those responsible for these brutal crimes, and the defense of democratic rights can only be secured through the unified struggle of the entire working class. The working class can and must expose the truth of these atrocities as part of the political struggle to unify working people in the fight to abolish the profit system, the root cause of war.



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