Sri Lankan government rejects returning wartime military-occupied land

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14 August 2026

The Sri Lankan government has ignored the continuing demands by Tamils in the North and East to return their lands seized by the military during the decades-long civil war and declared that land belonging to civilians will remain under military control.

More than a decade and a half has passed since the end of the 26-year communal war waged by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983. Yet thousands of acres that provided livelihoods remain occupied by the security forces and enclosed behind barbed-wire fences.

One of the promises made by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) to Tamils during the 2024 election campaigns was that these lands would be returned to their legitimate owners. Since coming to power only a tiny fraction of land has been released while the military occupation remains intact in these provinces. Earlier governments made similar false promises.

Speaking in Parliament on August 4, Deputy Defence Minister Aruna Jayasekara, a retired army major general, insisted that lands in "High Security Zones… of paramount importance and strategic significance to national security" would not be returned. Jayasekara made a similar statement in parliament on July 9.

According to the minister, since January 2025, the JVP/NPP government has released 1,109 acres of land from military control in the North and East, while 12,225 acres were being "currently utilized" by the military, including the Army, Air Force, Navy and also by the police.

These are not barren lands. They include agricultural land that have sustained people for generations, including grazing lands for livestock, fishing sites, and key infrastructure facilities such as schools, religious institutions and hospitals. The military's continued occupation functions as an economic blockade.

The minister rejected the description of these lands as "military occupied." Instead, he claimed the military has taken over the land for "emergency and security purposes for the assurance of national security perspective." It was necessary, he said, to prevent the trafficking of drugs, weapons and other contraband; combat human trafficking from India; and prevent illegal fishing by Indian vessels in Sri Lankan territorial waters.

He told parliament on July 9 that the land on which the Palaly military hospital in Jaffna is located could not be released from military control. He said that the Palaly area was a "High Security Zone" and the 1,662 acres within it had been acquired under the law for military purposes, claiming that steps were being taken to compensate the landowners.

Palaly, which was the military command centre in Jaffna Peninsula during the war with an airforce base, airport and nearby naval base, remains the security forces headquarters. Moreover, the Civil Aviation Authority has informed the Ministry of Defence that Palaly Airport, which occupies approximately 775 acres of land, will require more land for future development.

As a token gesture, the minister told parliament that "several plots of land totalling 353 acres have been identified" for release to previous owners "over the coming weeks and months."

For more than a decade, protests demanding the return of lands in the North and East and justice for the thousands of people "disappeared" by the military during the war have continued. Human Rights Watch has documented protest campaigns in Mullikulam, Iranaitivu, Keppapilavu, Puthukkudiyiruppu and Panama, some of which have continued for more than a year.

The Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research reported that families of the disappeared began protests in northern Kilinochchi in 2017, and that the campaign spread to every district in the northern and eastern provinces and

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continued at least until February 2022. These protests have continued under JVP/NPP rule as well.

In Mailaddy and Palaly alone, people have carried out nearly 20 weekly actions, while other protests against military occupation of civilian lands have also taken place. The second phase of the Keppapilavu campaign involved protests lasting more than 25 consecutive days.

Addressing the District Secretaries' Conference held at the Colombo District Secretariat on July 9, President Dissanayake once again repeated his empty promises to release land occupied by military camps without giving any specific dates or explaining how many acres of land would be released. He also stressed to district administrators the importance of making large tracts of land available to investors, including in the North and East.

Last month, S. Sritharan, a Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) MP, told parliament that the Kilinochchi district had become an important area for coconut cultivation but government plans for a wind-power project across 2,000 acres threatened to destroy hundreds of coconut plantations. Sritharan said local residents had opposed the project and called for its relocation.

Although the ITAK, a Tamil bourgeois party, makes muted criticisms of government policies, it has no genuine concern for the democratic rights of the Tamil people. It fully supports the implementation of the IMF-dictated austerity program, which undermines the social rights of all working people, and is silent over government attacks on democratic rights.

Responding to the deputy defence minister's statements on August 4, ITAK MP Shanakiyan Rasamanickam quibbled with the government's rejection of the term "military occupation" of land. He argued that if preventing drug trafficking and disaster management justified the huge military presence in the North, then similar measures should be taken on the southern and western coastlines. In other words, rather than opposing the military occupation of civilian land, he argued for the "equal" militarisation throughout the country.

Neither the ITAK nor any other Tamil political party is demanding the complete withdrawal of the military from the northern and eastern provinces, which is a fundamental precondition for returning the occupied lands to Tamil civilians. These parties oppose such a demand and, with the backing of imperialist powers and India, seek to bargain with the Colombo government over power-sharing arrangements while leaving intact the state apparatus built on Sinhalese-Buddhist chauvinism.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), have consistently fought throughout the 30-year civil war for the withdrawal of the military from the North and East, the return of lands belonging to Tamil and Muslim people, the release of political prisoners, and the abolition of repressive laws, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

The capitalist governments in Colombo, which since 1948 have used the poisonous policies of Sinhala chauvinist discrimination against Tamil and Muslim minorities to divide and weaken the working class along communal lines and preserve capitalist class rule, launched the war against the LTTE in 1983.

In opposition to the appeals by Tamil bourgeois parties to the "international community," Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers must unite against imperialism and the Colombo ruling elite. The working class must advance the following demands:

- Withdraw the military unconditionally from the North and East! Release all lands occupied by the military to legitimate owners!
- Release all political prisoners!
- Abolish the Prevention of Terrorism Act and all other repressive laws immediately!

The democratic rights of the Tamil people in the North and East can be secured only through the independent mobilisation of the working class in the fight for a socialist future. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers must unite to overthrow capitalism and establish a workers' and peasants' government and a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia.

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