

Sri Lankan workers comment on victory celebrations

By our correspondents
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The Sri Lankan government has been conducting an intense victory campaign since the army's defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There have now been weeks of rallies, parades and special Buddhist religious festivals that again demonstrate the Sinhala supremacist nature of the war.

At the local level, small-scale celebrations have been organised by ruling party MPs and local politicians to honour even colonels, majors and captains. The media has reported all these events, large and small, conducted discussion forums and published interview after interview with the defence chiefs.

This deluge of communalism and militarism is designed to stifle any criticism of the government. It is also aimed at suppressing any discussion of the army's war crimes that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Tamil civilians, or the plight of 300,000 people who have been herded into detention centres near Vavuniya.

At the same time, the campaign is a preparation for a major onslaught on the living standards of working people. Reeling under the impact of huge economic problems, President Mahinda Rajapakse has already spoken of a new "economic war" and demanded sacrifice from everyone, in the same spirit as the military, for the sake of "nation building".

WSWS reporters spoke last week to a range of workers from different parts of the country about the situation following the war. Our correspondents explained the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) longstanding opposition to the war, its demand for the unconditional withdrawal of troops from the North and East and the dismantling of detention camps.

A teacher from a school in Colombo said: "Many people hoisted the national flag on their vehicles as there was a big campaign about the military victory. Like many people, I also felt sort of relaxed as I thought now we would be able to travel in Colombo without bomb blasts.

The war is over, but what about solving our problems? Not only me, but many other people have also begun to think about these issues."

She recalled that Rajapakse had opposed any salary rise during the war. "The war is now over but the wage freeze is still in force. Those who seek salary increases will be treated as people who 'do not love the country'. There seems to be no solution in the foreseeable future. The trade unions have also joined the government's campaign," she added.

"Schools were closed for three days to accommodate army personnel brought to Colombo for the victory parade. But teachers had to report for work. They did not like closing schools in this manner. Some 200 teachers came to school on the day of the victory parade [last Wednesday]. We have television facilities but only about 10 teachers watched the event.

"My daughter had watched the military parade from home. She was shocked to see handicapped soldiers injured during the war taking part in the parade in wheelchairs. She heard that over 20,000 soldiers had been killed during the war. If the president wanted to salute and honour soldiers, why was he on the stage and taking salute of the soldiers, my daughter sarcastically asked.

"The government is going to wash its hands of supporting the families of the dead and maimed soldiers and put that burden on our shoulders. The government is planning various fund collection programs to build homes for them."

A small storeowner in Chilaw, north of Colombo, said: "Because of media suppression, people don't have access to news. The state-owned and private media hide the reality of every aspect of the war. The number of soldiers killed in the war and the number of civilians killed in the final battles are not known. If the people were aware of the actual statistics of dead soldiers and civilians, youth would not join the army.

“The president says the government has carried out a humanitarian operation. Then why he is keeping 300,000 people forcibly in camps? The government is lying.”

Jayasena from Bandarawela said: “[LTTE leader] Prabhakaran was killed by the army which won the war. But I don’t think the problems of Tamil people will be solved.” Jayasena compared the end of the war with the massacre of some 60,000 rural Sinhalese youth in 1989-1990. The problems of rural youth had not been solved, he commented.

Bandarawela is in the central hills, the tea-growing region of Sri Lanka. A Tamil tea estate worker in Bandarawela said: “[When the war started] in 1983, some Sinhalese people came to our estate and set fire to our line rooms [homes]. We fled to another division of the estate to save ourselves. After a few months we were resettled in the same houses without any repairs. After the defeat of LTTE, we are afraid of a repetition of 1983.

“We face anti-Tamil discrimination in this country. We have to work for a pittance as plantation workers. We were paid just 290 rupees [\$US2.50] per day. The prices of essential foods are high. We should be paid at least a wage of 500 rupees a day to manage our daily needs.

“Over the past three years the government said wages could not be increased because of the war. Now, they will say wages cannot be increased because of the rehabilitation work in the north. Our living conditions are worsening day by day. All the ruling class parties are the same. Our plantation union leaders act as advocates for the government. They will definitely advise us not to take industrial action and to support so-called nation building.”

Referring to Prabhakaran, he said people in the north suffered under him as well. “Our relatives living in the northern areas said they were treated by the LTTE as we are treated by the Colombo government.”

A tea plantation worker from Hatton said: “The Rajapakse government is the worst in Sri Lankan history that I have seen. This government won the war by killing thousands of people. In our estate, workers didn’t hoist national flags [to celebrate].”

He said there had already been communal provocations against Tamil-speaking plantation workers since the end of war. Unknown persons had arrived at the estates at Thalawakale and Maskeliya and demanded that workers remove their TV dish antennas. The reason seemed to be to stop plantation workers watching Indian channels.

“Arumugam Thondaman and P. Chandrasekaran [leaders of the plantation-based Ceylon Workers

Congress and Up-country Peoples Front and also cabinet ministers] support this murderous government. We are ashamed of the participation of Arumugam Thondaman in the victory parade.

“We have never faced living conditions like this in the past. The cost of living is intolerable and wages are frozen. But there were no strikes or struggles as the trade unions betrayed us in the previous struggles. This also helped Rajapakse to win the war. This government had the help of India, China, Russia and America to conduct the war.”

Gnanaratna, a worker from Kandy, said: “Tamil people have been forced to live in camps after the war and they do not have enough food, medicine and water. They have no freedom. This is not good. Although the war has ended, the problems of Tamil people are not over. I think Tamil people need a political solution.”

Gnanaratna was not clear about what a “political solution” would be. But he said that oppressed people from all ethnic communities had to unite against the elite of every community to bring about a political solution. He asked: “Why does the government need to increase the army by 50 percent after the war has ended? Is it to be used against working people in the country?”

“Since the war ended, the government has been trying to utilise the victory to maintain its rule. I don’t think they can do it according to their wishes. Workers’ wages are not enough to meet daily expenses. The prices of essentials are high. Epidemics such as dengue are spreading. The government has asked for an IMF [International Monetary Fund] loan. If the loan is given the government will have to implement the conditions of the IMF. Workers will come into struggle against these attacks.”

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