

Jaffna: One year after the end of the war in Sri Lanka

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It is now a year since President Mahinda Rajapakse's government claimed to have "liberated" the Tamil population from the "terrorism" of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, there has been no improvement in the lives of the people of Jaffna and other northern towns since the LTTE's defeat last May. Instead, there is an intensified military occupation, with many people living in refugee camps or makeshift huts and thousands of youth still under detention.

This week, soldiers and military intelligence personnel were dispatched to either shut down or closely monitor meetings and memorial events to mark the anniversary. On Monday, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the LTTE's former mouthpiece, held a low-key meeting in Jaffna to commemorate the tens of thousands of civilians killed in the final months of the military offensive last year. After it had started, soldiers surrounded the meeting and prevented it from continuing. Soldiers detained a reporter who was only released after he promised not to write an article on the incident.

TNA member of parliament Mavai Senadhirajah told the small gathering that "in contrast to government's victory celebrations we should hold this day as a sad day". He said many people had died in the last days of the war. He gave no explanation for the LTTE's defeat and said nothing about fighting for the rights of the local population. The TNA has said it is ready to back the government in devising a "political solution" for Tamils. This means a power-sharing arrangement between the Tamil elites and the Colombo government at the expense of working people—Tamil and Sinhala alike.

A number of other anniversary meetings and events were blocked, with soldiers chasing people away. On

May 18, the army closed down a meeting at the Jaffna office of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), also known as the Peoples Front for Tamil Nationalism.

During the general election in April and for a few days following, there was a brief easing of the main military checkpoints in Jaffna. However, since Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse visited Jaffna in late April, the security measures have been re-tightened. Rajapakse was accompanied by the three armed services chiefs and the Inspector General of Police.

On May 3, the Jaffna commanding officer, Major General Mahinda Hathurusinghe, formally announced that security would be tightened in Jaffna. Recent reports of abductions, murders and extortions provided the pretext. Detachments of four or five armed soldiers now stand at road junctions and bridges, checking vehicles and people.

Facing public anger over the military's continued occupation of private houses, buildings and land, Defence Secretary Rajapakse reportedly told security forces commanders that the military would be "gradually withdrawn" from private properties. In 1995, after the military recaptured Jaffna from the LTTE, it seized large areas of land and evicted people from their home in order to establish high security zones (HSZs). Today, 15 such zones cover 160 square kilometres or 18 percent of the Jaffna peninsula. Some 25,000 homes remain occupied, of which 18,000 are in the HSZs.

Displaced people are pressing to regain their homes. On Tuesday, the Union of Displaced People (UDP) of Valikamam north, held a meeting on the issue with MPs from the TNA, the United National Party and the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP). EPDP leader Douglas Devananda, a cabinet minister in the Rajapakse government, declared that he would take up

the matter with “higher ups” and get a solution in two weeks.

Like Devananda’s other promises, the latest is a fraud. Nothing has changed for the better in Jaffna over the past 12 months. Schools, hospitals, roads, housing and transport remain dilapidated. Many refugees and “resettled” people live in appalling conditions.

During the war many families fled to the LTTE-controlled Vanni, south of the peninsula. After living there for more than a decade, they were forced to flee to government-controlled areas in the final stages of the war. About 280,000 people were detained in huge camps controlled by the military. In recent months, some of these refugees have been “resettled” in Jaffna, but without any decent housing or means of livelihood.

Speaking to WSWs reporters, a “resettled” woman expressed disgust with the political parties. “No one is helping us,” she said. “We have been given tin sheets. On rainy days we have no place to sleep. There are no toilet facilities, and to fetch water we have to go 2 kilometres. We don’t even have proper vessels to collect water. Refugee relief was ended last month. We have no jobs, so we do odd jobs to earn a living. Our meals consist of rice with coconut sambol.

“During the election campaign, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) [Rajapakse’s party] candidate stood as an independent, telling us we would be provided with job opportunities and houses made of bricks. The EPDP and TNA candidates also appealed for our votes, making same false promises. Nothing has happened.

“One of my sons died at Mullivaikkal [where the final military assault took place last May] without receiving proper medical attention. My sister and her husband died in a shell attack, leaving three children orphaned. Now these children are struggling to live with relatives who cannot afford to maintain them. When we lived in the LTTE-held area we had problems with them. Now we have been uprooted from there and face more problems. We feel we have no future under these rulers.”

Another woman commented: “Our small tent was flooded by yesterday’s heavy rain. We could not sleep for the whole night. When I saw you coming I hoped you were village officers visiting us to help. I have no work and no income. I am indebted to the village fund

to the tune of 6,000 rupees. Without a job how can I pay that back? Here our children have no facilities. All these political parties, like the TNA and the EPDP, made promises but produce no action.”

The Rajapakse government and Tamil businessmen have other priorities. On the initiative of the Jaffna Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), a trade fair was held in April to encourage the 200 local and overseas companies in attendance to “explore the business opportunities” in the war-torn region. JCCI chairman K. Pooranachandran told the media: “We will soon see a time where both local and international investors will come behind the North and East entrepreneur and signs of this are already emerging.” After explaining that there were 200,000 unemployed youth in the north, he said the trade fair would help fast track the industrialisation of the Jaffna peninsula.

In other words, investors are being enticed to exploit the area as a cheap labour platform. For this purpose, the government is planning several free trade zones in the north and east. In addition, the Board of Investment has opened a branch office in Jaffna, mainly to woo wealthy members of the overseas Tamil diaspora to re-invest in the region. The Central Bank also has plans to open a branch in Jaffna, as does the Colombo Stock exchange.

By tightening the military occupation, the Rajapakse government is demonstrating its readiness to maintain the repressive methods that it employed during the war to suppress any opposition by working people to the appalling social conditions and sweatshop exploitation that these business ventures will rest upon.

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