The human cost of Sri Lanka's war

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Too many heroes From The Economist print edition And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blindsALONGSIDE some of the government’s finest military hardware at a ceremonial parade in Colombo on June 3rd were dozens of disabled soldiers in gleaming wheelchairs. Sri Lanka has paid a heavy price for its recent rout of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the defence secretary and brother of the president, has admitted that 6,261 soldiers were killed and 29,551 wounded in three years of fighting. He revealed, too, that a total of 23,000 troops have died since the first casualties in October 1981, when the Tigers’ leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, sprang off a bicycle and shot two soldiers running errands in the northern town of Jaffna. Prabhakaran and much of the army he built are now dead. The Tigers have not disclosed their losses but the Sri Lankan army commander, General Sarath Fonseka, says an estimated 22,000 have been killed in the past three years, and 9,000 have surrendered. The human cost to both sides was particularly heavy during the final three months, as the Tigers were driven into a fast-shrinking pocket of land in the north. The distinction between Tiger combatants and the civilians they were holding to fend off the onslaught blurred fatally. Thousands of non-combatants were killed or wounded, mostly in shelling by the army. It had been ordered to notch up a speedy victory, amid calls from abroad for a truce. At the United Nations human-rights council in Geneva, Sri Lanka last month shrugged off attempts by Western countries to institute an inquiry into alleged war crimes by both sides. But it still faces the fury of the Tamil diaspora and the threat of sanctions, such as the withdrawal of trade privileges from the EU. Confident, however, in the backing of countries such as China and Russia, President Mahinda Rajapaksa can defy what he terms Western “doublespeak”. And on June 3rd he made another big victory speech, his third in two weeks. He paid glowing tribute to army families, saying some had given up all their children to the armed forces. In Samadhigama, a poor village 280km (175 miles) north-east of Colombo, a sobbing 87-year-old Ukkubandage Sumanawathie knows what he is talking about. Five grandchildren died in the war. A sixth is missing in action. Mrs Sumanawathie lives with her 36-year-old daughter, Saman Malini. No celebratory flags fly in her village, as they do in Colombo. Instead, little white markers cut out of polythene bags are still planted along the narrow rubble lane to the cemetery. Mrs Malini’s teenage son was buried there in an unmarked grave on May 12th. The army brought his remains in a sealed coffin, with a framed statement calling him a hero. He had served for less than six months. Mrs Malini will use her son’s death benefits to put a headstone on his grave and complete their half-built brick house. A local official says most poor bereaved families do the same. With just 172 households, Samadhigama has 130 soldiers. Kukulewa, the adjoining village, has 160 from 270 households. Socially, says the official, enlistment is the “accepted thing to do”. Many villages around Sri Lanka are now coping with such post-conflict difficulties. Demobilisation, however, is unlikely to be one of them. Recruitment has in fact increased, ostensibly to get rid of mines and to secure territorial gains. The defence secretary has promised to keep paying death benefits to army families despite fiscal constraints. With thousands of such households to support—and at least 5,000 permanently disabled veterans to rehabilitate—the government has appealed for donations. There are also private initiatives, including one to buy commode toilets for disabled soldiers who can no longer use squatting pans. But Harsha de Silva, an economist, argues that this piecemeal fund-raising is insufficient. He urges the government to set up a veteran’s administration. And there should be savings on arms purchases, he points out, that could be diverted towards caring for some of the war’s many victims. courtesy: economist.com