

# **Sri Lanka: Address the unsustainable military expenditure**

Thursday 11 August 2022, by [Daily FT](#) (Date first published: 26 March 2022).

**There is an old saying that ‘if your only tool is a hammer then every problem looks like a nail’. This is becoming very true with Sri Lanka’s military. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a former soldier who has limited experience in politics or administration, is increasingly depending on the military for solving problems which are significantly beyond the natural realm of the military.**

Last week the Government ordered soldiers to be posted at hundreds of fuel stations to maintain order as agitated crowds became unruly. The shortages have created chaos across the country. The failure of the Government to secure this vital commodity and the arbitrary way in which fuel is distributed, with selected groups getting preference over others, has increased resentment among the public. This tense situation has led to brawls, disorder and even killings at fuel stations. The police are best suited and trained to handle such situations of public disorder.

As the Rathupaswala massacre and numerous such incidents in the north and the east should be remembered when the military is sent into deal with civil matters, the results are often deadly. Yet, the move by the Government to call in the military to the fuel stations is only the latest in a long line of such decisions that have enhanced the role of the military in day-to-day public life. The military has encroached into numerous spheres that should ideally remain in the private sector. These include leisure and hospitality, construction, agriculture, heritage protection, civil aviation and much more. After the disastrous policy of the Government to ban all imports of inorganic fertiliser and the collapse of the whole agriculture sector as a result, the military has now even been called to produce organic fertiliser.

With this expansion of its role, the military expenditure has bloated to an unsustainable level. Sri Lanka today has the world’s 17<sup>th</sup> largest military. It has not significantly reduced the number of personnel since the end of the war 13 years ago, nor restructured to suit the different realities of a post-conflict, democratic country. Reforms that would reflect the demography of the country, which should have taken place soon after the conflict ended or the necessary accountability processes to ensure that there would not be reoccurrence of the human rights and humanitarian law violations for which the military has been accused of since 1971 have not taken place either.

In addition, there are numerous examples of colossal waste and allegations of corruption regarding the money allocated to the military. The massive defence ministry complex partially constructed at Akuregoda, the selling of the army headquarters’ land at the heart of Colombo, and corruption, numerous allegations during weapons procurement are examples.

It is necessary to address the issue of military expenditure in addition to the role of the military in the wake of unprecedented militarisation under the presidency of Gotabaya Rajapaksa. In the 2022 budget, the highest allocation was made to the Ministry of Defence. Even while a pandemic was raging in the country allocations for healthcare were reduced. This was the case for education too.

The direct military allocations for the Sri Lanka Army, Navy and the Air Force, inclusive of both recurrent and capital expenditure, was a staggering Rs. 308 billion.

This was 12.3% of the total estimated Government expenditure of Rs. 2.5 trillion. As a percentage of GDP, Sri Lanka spends nearly 2% on military expenses, an extraordinarily high amount for a country that does not face an existential security threat. In addition, unlike other countries, Sri Lanka does not have a military industrial sector that produces weapons or ammunition, either for itself or for export. Therefore, much of the capital expenditure incurred by the military is primarily for imports that hardly create any economic activity within the country other than for commissions for a selected few.

As the country faces unprecedented economic challenges, the colossal military expenditure has become unsustainable. While there are many good reasons for the restructuring and reforming of the military in the post-conflict set up, which until now have been ignored, the current economic predicament makes these changes imminently essential not only for the future wellbeing of the military but for the whole national economy.

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