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Former Sri Lankan army chief convicted for war crimes claim

General Sarath Fonseka claimed defence secretary ordered execution of LTTE leaders as they surrendered during civil war



General Sarath Fonseka leaves a court in Colombo after being sentenced to three years in prison. Photograph: Eranga Jayawardena/AP

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General Sarath Fonseka, the former Sri Lankan army chief turned opposition leader, has been sentenced to three years in prison for claiming that top government officials were responsible for war crimes during the final phases of the country's 25-year civil war in 2009.

The 60-year-old is already serving a 30-month sentence for alleged corruption and faces a host of further charges. On Friday, he was found guilty of "spreading rumours and causing public disorder". Supporters say the allegations against him are politically motivated.

The conviction was for remarks Fonseka was quoted as having made during an interview in

which he accused the defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa - considered a hardliner within the government - of ordering the execution of LTTE leaders as they surrendered.

Fonseka led the military campaign against separatists from the Tamil minority fighting in the Liberation Tigers of Talim Eelam (LTTE) organisation.

A career soldier, he was once close to the current civilian government of Sri Lanka and especially to Rajapaksa. However, the two fell out when Fonseka launched his own political career, challenging President Mahinda Rakapaksa in elections in early 2010.

The decision to sentence Fonseka comes days before the release of an official Sri Lankan government report into widespread claims of substantial human rights abuses by both sides in the closing weeks of the war as army units cornered LTTE fighters in the north-east of the country.

Hundreds of thousands of civilians had retreated with the LTTE, and many - up to 30,000 according to some estimates - were killed in the ensuing combat.

Human rights organisations have accused Sri Lankan army forces under Fonseka of indiscriminately shelling areas in which large numbers of civilians were sheltering, as well as executing surrendering fighters.

A reconciliation commission, appointed by the government last year after international pressure, was due to present its report to Rajapaksa this week.

Human rights groups say the commission does not meet international standards and some of its members have conflicts of interest.

An earlier UN panel found credible allegations of serious abuses on both sides (pdf) of the war, which ended in May 2009.

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