

Sri Lanka raises army pay by 55 percent to attract recruits

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The Sri Lankan army Thursday announced salary increases of 55 percent in a bid to attract new recruits following a move to remove some 56,000 deserters from its books, officials said. Soldiers would start on a salary of 9,720 rupees (just over 100 dollars), up from 6,280 rupees marking a 54.77 percent increase, a spokesman said. He said the army will begin recruiting men between the ages of 18 and 24 during a nationwide month-long enlistment campaign starting August 18.

The latest recruitment drive comes amid plans to discharge 56,000 soldiers who are listed as having deserted their posts, mostly in the past two decades during the height of fighting with Tamil Tiger rebels. The discharging of deserters is to begin in the western district of Gampaha shortly, the defence ministry said adding that those who were absent without leave for over three years will not be taken back. However, soldiers who had left their post in the past two years would be given the option of rejoining the military after undergoing fresh training. In recent years, the annual desertion rate has been as high as 4,000, officials said. The heavy military casualties during clashes with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also saw both sides finding it difficult to attract new recruits. The LTTE has admitted losing about 17,600 of their cadres since the first Tiger rebel was killed in November 1982 at the hands of the military, while security forces too have suffered similar fatalities during the same period.

Over 35,000 government troops and Tiger rebels are also estimated to have been wounded in the armed conflict which escalated in July 1983, but began in the early 1970s. The total strength of the Sri Lankan military is estimated at about 150,000. While there are no reliable estimates for the strength of Tiger rebels, figures between 6,000 to 16,000 have been mentioned in recent times. Both sides are currently observing a truce arranged by peace broker Norway since February 23 last year.