

Over 1,500 casualties in three days of Sri Lanka war

Our correspondent
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The Sri Lankan regime claimed September 29 to have captured Mankulam, a strategic point on the route to Jaffna, defeating the forces of the separatist LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) defending the town.

The Sri Lankan armed forces launched their Jaya Sikuru (Victory Assured) offensive in May 1997, seeking to clear a land route into Jaffna, the largest city in the mainly Tamil-populated northern province. After initial gains, the offensive was blocked by the LTTE at Mankulam at the beginning of 1998. Sri Lankan army forces proceeding northwards from Vavuniya were unable to break through the LTTE resistance. The plans of the Peoples Alliance regime to hold provincial council elections after a big military victory in the north had to be abandoned as a result.

On Sunday, September 27 the LTTE took the offensive, attacking army bases on the same Colombo-Jaffna route further to the north of Mankulam. Both Kilinochchi and Paranthan army bases were attacked simultaneously.

When the LTTE overran the Kilinochchi army base it is believed more than 500 government soldiers were killed. The LTTE said it killed 800 soldiers and wounded more than 1,000 while it lost 240 of its own cadres.

The Sri Lankan government accepted 400 bodies of army men, handed over by the LTTE through the International Committee of the Red Cross. Arms, ammunition and military equipment worth billions of rupees were destroyed or fell into the hands of the LTTE. For the past three days streams of ambulances carrying hundreds of injured soldiers, airlifted to Colombo, have roared through the streets of the capital city and its suburbs, taking the wounded to various hospitals.

In response to this military rout, the government launched a retaliatory attack to secure Mankulam. The official communiqué announced that 100 soldiers were killed in the battle for Mankulam and the LTTE lost 250, while a 'formidable number' surrendered. It is clear that

the government carried out a near-suicidal offensive to recapture Mankulam in order to prevent the military debacle from becoming a political crisis in the South.

On September 23 the government passed supplementary budget estimates in Parliament amounting to Rs. 12.2 billion in additional war expenditures. The 1998 government budget allocated Rs. 44 billion for the war, which was used up in only eight months. The total military expenditure for 1998 is over Rs. 56 billion, 6 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product and more than 25 percent of the government's annual revenue.

Already the government has issued a circular to all public and private sector institutions demanding that one week's salary of each worker be deducted for war expenditure.

In this racist war against the Tamil minority in the North and East the government's declared position is to weaken the LTTE militarily and either drive it to the negotiating table or 'defeat it totally.' President Chandrika Kumarathunga said: 'The opportunity to join other Sri Lankans negotiating a settlement of all outstanding ethnic issues remains open to the LTTE if it eschews terrorism and its bloody call for a separate state.'

The imperialist powers and international finance capital are pressing for an agreement between the two parties in order to have 'stable rule' conducive to foreign investment, along the lines of similar agreements in Ireland and Palestine.

Recently a government-sponsored seminar was held in Sri Lanka, with the participation of Professor Thomas Grant Fraser, said to have drafted the 'Peace Agreement' in Ireland. British High Commissioner David Tatham also participated in this seminar, and the government and opposition United National Party (UNP) leaders joined to discuss the difficulties in reaching an understanding.

The LTTE's stand was stated by Tamil Chelvam, the leader of the organization's political wing. He said in a

recent interview: 'We say that this problem requires a clear political solution. We also want to find a solution without resorting to war.... There is a common problem that prevents both parties from arriving at a political solution. That problem is mistrust.... The present impasse is such that it is only an independent third party that has nothing to do with this war that can effectively build up trust and confidence between the two parties. Once mutual confidence is brought about, discussions would be initiated with the intervention of a third party' (*The Sunday Leader*, September 6, 1998).

In his interview the LTTE spokesman also demanded that the PA and the UNP get together to offer a solution. His reference to a 'third party' suggests the intervention of either an imperialist power or India. The bloody battle in the Vanni district could be a prelude to such a discussion. But both parties are locked in a battle for the supremacy in such a bargain.

An agreement between the PA government and the LTTE or the establishment of a separate Tamil statelet will not bring a solution to the question of the national democratic rights of the Tamil masses. The LTTE has brought the Tamil masses to a dead end. They are not only suffering from the racist war of the Sri Lankan ruling class, but also from the repressive measures imposed on them by the LTTE. The LTTE is only concerned about making a deal with the ruling regime of Sri Lanka and the imperialist powers to secure privileges for the Tamil bourgeoisie to exploit the masses they claim to liberate.

The LTTE's disregard for the interests of the masses was shown again on September 29 when it shot down a Colombo-bound plane transporting Tamil civilian passengers. Forty-eight passengers, including two women and two children, as well as seven crew members died in the crash.



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