

Sri Lankan airforce bombs Tamil civilians

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The Sri Lankan Air Force killed 21 people and injured another 41 when it bombed the Tamil village of Puthukkudiyiruppu in the Mulaitivu district of the Northern Province on September 15. Many people were at a small village market when the bombs hit at around 10am. Most of the victims, including school children, women and aged, were Tamil refugees living in nearby huts. Fifty huts and small buildings were destroyed in the attack.

The attack is part of the continued fighting in the protracted war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) forces in Sri Lanka's north and east.

At the Cabinet press briefing in the capital of Colombo on September 16, a military spokesman vehemently denied that the Air Force had carried out such an attack. However, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) branch in Sri Lanka confirmed the report and said mutilated bodies had been seen all over the place. The Sri Lankan media and authorities then tried to justify the bombing by saying that if it had happened, it would have been the result of the LTTE herding civilians into its camps, making them targets for airforce planes.

In the face of mounting evidence, Deputy Defence Minister, General A. Ratwatte admitted to the BBC on September 17 that “the Air Force might have accidentally killed Tamil civilians”. Justifying what he claimed as an “accident”, Ratwatte said: “NATO, which had far more sophisticated aircraft hadn't managed to avoid civilian targets in former Yugoslavia.” In reality, the Sri Lankan military has deliberately chosen a civilian target for its own purposes just as NATO bombed bridges, factories, villages and TV stations in Yugoslavia.

The provocative air attack, killing innocent civilians, was carried out when sections of big business are trying to arrange a settlement between the Peoples Alliance

(PA) government, the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the LTTE. The National Committee for Peace and Economic Development, a forum of prominent businessmen, recently held discussions with the PA, UNP and JVP. Its chief, Lalith Kotalawala, head of a major Sri Lankan group of companies, said he was prepared to meet with the LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran for talks. In recent years, the US and the European powers have been pushing for such a settlement, saying that political instability was a major obstacle to investment.

For their own ends, big business politicians are attempting to exploit the widespread sentiment against the war among broad layers of people. The drawn-out war to suppress the Tamil minority has since 1983 left 60,000 Tamils dead, mainly in the North and East, thousands maimed and hundreds of thousands of refugees. Many Sinhalese civilians have died in reprisals and bomb attacks by LTTE units.

Elements in ruling circles including in the government, opposition parties and the military are bitterly opposed, however, to any settlement. They insist on gaining military control over the north and east. For the last five years, the government has not implemented its own plan to end the war—a “devolution” package aimed at reaching a deal with the LTTE and other Tamil groups by granting limited powers to the north and east. Deputy Defence Minister Ratwatte and a number of other ministers have not denied media reports that they have expressed dissatisfaction about the “devolution” package in cabinet meetings.

The *Island* newspaper, an English language daily that supports the war, carried a lead story on September 5 referring to opposition in the military to the “peace campaigners”. “Military officials blamed some politicians and majority of foreign-funded NGOs (Non

Government Organisations) for hampering efforts to strengthen the armed forces and police. All these peace marches, demonstrations and so-called satyagrahas [sit-in-protests] have a negative impact on everything we are trying to achieve, one officer said.”

The Air Force attack came a day after the military was forced to halt the latest war campaign—*Ronagosa* or Battle Cry-V—to capture Periyamadu area, east of the coastal town of Mannar in the Northern Province. According to the Ministry of Defence, 53 security forces and 116 LTTE soldiers were killed in the operation and hundreds of others were injured. The campaign was a setback for the government and the military, which was forced to halt the operation and lost a number of arms caches to the LTTE.

While the military claimed to have been attacking LTTE targets, the result of the bombing raid has been to cut across attempts to reach any peace deal and to further whip up ethnic enmities. Three days later, on September 18, an armed group, probably from the LTTE, raided the village of Gonagala in the Ampara district of Eastern Province, killing 52 Sinhalese peasants and injuring 16 more. Among those hacked to death were pregnant women, children and the elderly. Human rights groups, including the Amnesty International, have accused the LTTE of carrying out the killings—a claim that the LTTE has not denied.

The government, which needed to distract public attention from the bombing of Puthukkudiyiruppu, immediately seized on the killings at Gongala, hurriedly sending foreign and local journalists to the site to gain maximum publicity. President Kumaratunga, who has not uttered a word about the bombing, quickly condemned the LTTE for the Ampara attack. Two chauvinist organisations—the Sinhala Heroes Forum and the National Movement Against Terrorism—have called for protests and pickets over the massacre. Tamils in villages adjoining Gonagala have started to flee fearing retaliation by racist thugs as well as the Sri Lankan army and police.

The Sri Lankan security forces have already stepped up their repression on Tamils elsewhere. Last Sunday hundreds of Tamil youth were rounded up and more than 100 were detained in Colombo. In Mannar, a coastal town in Northern Province under army control, more than 500 young Tamils were arrested on Monday. Search operations have also begun in the plantation

areas where Tamil tea estate workers live.

While holding out the prospect of a devolution package and a deal with the LTTE, the PA government has also responded to demands by the military for more sophisticated hardware. On September 13, the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry invited foreign dealers to register for supply of high-tech laser guided electronic warfare systems—the first time a Sri Lankan government has ordered such weaponry.



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