

Fierce fighting around key northern military base in Sri Lanka

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is continuing its military campaign to penetrate the Jaffna peninsula in the northern province of Sri Lanka. Heavy fighting has been reported for the 17th day in a row around Elephant Pass, a strategic causeway at the southern end of the peninsula linking it to the rest of the island.

On December 27, the LTTE claimed to have captured the Umayalakulam army camp five kilometres north of Parathan. While denying the claim Sri Lankan defence authorities admitted heavy fighting in the area. Over the weekend at least 21 Sri Lankan soldiers and 18 LTTE fighters died in fierce artillery exchanges.

Earlier Sri Lankan Army (SLA) press releases reported a seaborne attack on the east of peninsula at Thanankilappu and “continuous clashes” around the Elephant Pass base. No journalists are permitted into the war zone and the Sri Lankan Army heavily censors news from the area.

The Sri Lankan military has three large military complexes on the Jaffna peninsula—Elephant Pass army base, Palaly airforce-army base and Karainagr naval base—as well as a number of other important military camps. Throughout the 17-year war, the LTTE has never captured the Elephant Pass complex even though it held most of the Jaffna peninsula up until 1995 when it was retaken by the army. In 1993, around 800 LTTE fighters died in a failed attempt to take Elephant Pass.

The LTTE began its most recent attacks on the Jaffna peninsula on December 11. The first assaults were beaten back but on December 17, the LTTE began attacking in the Parathan area and shot down an air force Mi-24 helicopter. On December 19, it captured Vettalaikerni, a naval and army post on the coast between Kaddaikadu and Maruthankerni just to the east of Elephant Pass. Vettalaikerni was an important base

for supplying the Elephant Pass camp and for monitoring maritime movements in the northeast. The army has been pouring reinforcements into the area, as the fall of the Elephant Pass camp would change the whole military equation in northern Sri Lanka.

In the north of the Jaffna peninsula, election officials were forced to shift five polling stations set up south of Jaffna town for the December 21 presidential poll after LTTE attacks. According to some reports, the army has placed heavy artillery in densely populated areas sparking protests from local residents who fear they may be caught in the crossfire. On December 28, the Sri Lankan airforce bombed Ariyalai, just east of Jaffna town where an army camp is situated, setting fire to five houses. Residents in Jaffna town also reported shelling from the same direction.

The latest fighting comes after a series of defeats for the Sri Lankan army in November in the Wanni area to the south of the Jaffna peninsula. Soon after the announcement of the presidential elections, the LTTE launched a major offensive, overrunning six large army camps—Nedunkerni, Oddusudan, Kanagarayanakulam, Ampagamam, Mankulam and Puliyanakulam—and a number of smaller posts in a matter of days. The Indian-based *Frontline* magazine gave the following account of the military debacle:

“The government began its manoeuvres in the Wanni with the launching of Operation Jayasikurui [Victory Assured], but called them off in December 1998. The operation had seen the Army sustain tremendous losses, with the LTTE taking to positional warfare by defending entrenched positions. Now, after the first stage of Oyatha Alaigal-III, the Army has lost 30 km of the 44 km stretch it had seized on the A-9 highway and, according to preliminary estimates, 1,269 sq. km of territory on the eastern Wanni front. It has lost in just a

week areas annexed over a period of two and a half years: the losses include 10 bases, 24 camps, 116 posts and an unknown number of bunkers. The Tigers seized massive amounts of arms, ammunition, equipment, tanks and armoured cars and other vehicles. So too were large amounts of dry rations. Although the Government puts it at unbelievably low levels, the Army and the Navy have lost more than a thousand men, Opposition parties allege. The LTTE claims that its losses are only in hundreds.

“The more significant aspect of the fighting was the fact that the LTTE adopted conventional techniques to chase the Army out. Thousands of troops literally ran away instead of fighting. There have been reports of rebellion, in some places, in which officers and military policemen were shot. Large-scale desertions have occurred. There has been a breakdown in discipline. In short, the Army, despite its numerical and logistical superiority, has been decisively routed...”

The military setback in the Wanni area created a major crisis for the President Chandrika Kumaratunga who had called early presidential elections and was counting on the army's military victories to bolster her campaign. Government ministers and the state media accused the opposition United National Party (UNP) of being involved in the embarrassing defeats and set up a criminal investigation and a military court of inquiry into the fiasco. The official inquiries have, however, blamed the defeats on poor command.

Kumaratunga came to power in 1994 promising to negotiate an end to the war with the LTTE. But after talks broke down in April 1995, her government dramatically escalated the war. Official figures show that well over half of the military casualties in the 17-year war have taken place in the last five years under the People's Alliance (PA) government. A recently issued army souvenir to commemorate its 50th anniversary put the number of officers and soldiers killed in the fighting at 10,688, of which 6,261 died in the last five years.

According to a report published in the state-owned *Daily News* in August, the military lost 3,671 troops in battle, 8,725 wounded and 1,088 missing in action prior to 1994. Over the same period, 6,107 LTTE fighters died in the fighting and 5,901 civilians were killed. Since 1994, 8,402 government soldiers have been killed, 18,624 wounded and 1,334 missing in action.

The same report stated that 10,581 LTTE troops have also been killed. The death toll among civilians was 1,480 with 64 wounded and 202 disappeared.

These figures reveal the enormous human cost of Kumaratunga's so-called war for peace—the escalation of the Sri Lankan military's operations to weaken the LTTE and force it to the negotiating table on the government's terms. The LTTE's latest military advances have strengthened its bargaining position in pushing for a separate state in the North and East of the country.

During the election campaign, the LTTE appeared to be leaning towards opposition UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had expressed his readiness for unconditional talks and the creation of an interim administration involving the LTTE in the northeast areas. But the failed LTTE assassination attempt on Kumaratunga during the PA's final rally on December 18 assisted her to hold onto power and strengthened the more militarist elements in the government and the security forces. While sections of big business are pushing for the government and opposition to join forces to negotiate with the LTTE, Kumaratunga's hardline speech on taking the oath of office on December 22 indicates that fighting is likely to intensify and become more bitter.



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