

Military debacle at Elephant Pass set to trigger political crisis in Sri Lanka

A correspondent
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The fall of two strategic army camps at Elephant Pass and Iyakkachchi in northern Sri Lanka to the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas last Saturday is a military debacle, which is certain to intensify the political crisis facing the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The heavily fortified Elephant Pass camp guarded the key causeway linking the Jaffna Peninsula to the rest of the island. Heavy fighting has taken place in the area for the last three to four weeks with both sides using artillery and long-range mortars. The LTTE seized the southern defences around Elephant Pass and then severed the sea link to the base by capturing the area around Vettalaikerny, and more recently cut the main northern highway, threatening to completely isolate the base.

Details of what happened on Saturday remain unclear as the Sri Lankan military heavily censors all news reports of the fighting and journalists are not permitted in the war zone. According to the LTTE, its forces killed more than 1,000 Sri Lankan troops in 48 hours of heavy fighting forcing the military to abandon the Iyakkachchi-Elephant Pass complex and to retreat north towards Jaffna town.

According to the LTTE statement: "LTTE's special forces and commando units stormed into the Iyakkachchi military base in the early hours of the morning (April 22) in a multi-prolonged assault and overran the well-fortified camp after several hours of intense fighting. LTTE commandos who penetrated the central base destroyed several artillery pieces, tanks, armored vehicles and ammunition dumps."

The LTTE also claims to have seized tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery, other weapons and large quantities of ammunition. A Reuter's article referred to unconfirmed reports that many Sri Lankan army troops were still trapped behind enemy lines.

After a delay in making any announcement, the Sri Lankan military has attempted to put the best face on what can only be described as a major military defeat. The Elephant Pass camp was manned by an estimated 17,000 troops, including special forces units, backed by armour, artillery and air support. Throughout 17 years of fighting, the LTTE has never been able to take the base, despite repeated attempts.

The military are attempting to portray the defeat as "a tactical

retreat". Army spokesman Brigadier Palitha Fernando simply stated: "Heavy fighting continues. The army has readjusted its defence lines north of Elephant Pass." According to the Defence Ministry, casualties amounted to just 8 officers and 80 soldiers dead and 457 injured, including 19 officers, while the LTTE had sustained at least 150 dead.

The Sri Lankan army is now attempting to fortify positions around Jaffna town, a city of 500,000 people on the northern tip of the peninsula. The military retook Jaffna from the LTTE in 1995-96 and has about a third of its estimated 100,000 troops stationed in the area, which also contains key naval and airforce bases. Already there have been sharp battles on other parts of Jaffna peninsula. An unnamed Sri Lankan officer told CNN that the main concern of the military was to prevent LTTE fighters from establishing their artillery within range of the airport. The LTTE have already indicated that their forces will continue their drive north and claim to have broken through newly established army defence lines at Soranpattu just north of Elephant Pass.

Military analysts have already likened the loss of the Elephant Pass camp to the defeat of French colonial forces in Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, which finally forced France to pull out of Indochina. While unable to report on the defeat as a result of military censorship, an editorial in the Colombo-based *Sunday Times* last weekend commented: "Elephant Pass is the gateway to Jaffna. A defeat at this strategic point will jeopardise the military situation to an irrecoverable position. The corollary of this will be that political posturing will be correspondingly affected. This is a matter of grave concern to the nation. The bottom line is that any reversal at Elephant Pass is both militarily and politically catastrophic."

The loss of Elephant Pass will undoubtedly exacerbate already sharp tensions in the government and set off a new round of recriminations within the army top brass. The military is already reeling from the impact of a series of significant defeats last November in the Vanni region to the south of Jaffna where the LTTE overran 10 army bases in quick succession. At the beginning of April, the army compulsorily retired seven of its top military officers—ranging in rank from Major General to Major—based on the findings of a commission into the Vanni defeats.

In an attempt to stem the deteriorating situation at Elephant Pass, Kumaratunga, who is at present in London for medical treatment, faxed through further changes to the military leadership. Major General Janaka Perera, who is notorious for his involvement in the terror campaign waged against rural youth in Sri Lanka's south in 1988-89, was appointed Overall Operation Commander (OOC) for the Jaffna peninsula and Joint Chief of Operations. At the same time General Rohan Daluwatta was appointed Chief of Defence Staff with full powers—a position he held briefly last May before Kumaratunga suddenly scrapped it.

These rather erratic changes to the military line-up point to a government in deep crisis. Divisions in the government's ranks are also indicated by failure of Kumaratunga to appoint Deputy Defence Minister General Anuruddha Ratwatte to act as the Minister of Defence, during her absence. As well as being president, Kumaratunga also holds the key portfolios of defence and finance. She has made no statement on the defeat at Elephant Pass but is expected to cut short her visit to Britain and return to Colombo.

The Peoples Alliance (PA) government is already under attack in the Colombo media. A front-page editorial in the pro-war *Island* newspaper warned: “The military in the north is facing a grave disaster and so is Sri Lanka. Thousands of Sri Lankan youth have paid with their lives to save this country from being divided. Billions of rupees are spent each year. Our forces outnumber those of the terrorists and have been far better equipped. But we have been on the retreat. Can this go on for long?” The newspaper called on Kumaratunga to introduce new strategies to defeat the rebels.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) attacked the government for the debacle and formally called for an emergency session of parliament to discuss the fall of Elephant Pass. The government has also been under pressure recently from Sinhala chauvinist groups such as the National Movement Against Terrorism and Sinhala Veera Vidahana, which staged protests in Colombo earlier in the month demanding an intensification of the war to finish off the LTTE.

The defeat at Elephant Pass reflects a far deeper malaise in the Sri Lankan armed forces than incompetent military leadership or the failure of the Kumaratunga government to pursue the war. In fact, since initially coming to office in 1994 on a platform of ending the war, Kumaratunga has dramatically stepped up military operations. During the latest presidential elections last December, she sought to outdo the chauvinist rhetoric of her opponents, pointing to the recapture of Jaffna during her term of office.

But more than 60,000 have died in the protracted 17-year civil war and many more have been injured or left homeless. In the current fighting in Jaffna, more than 5,000 people were trapped within the war-torn Pallai and Pachchilaipalli areas, provoking anti-government protests in Jaffna town in early April. During a confrontation involving 2,000 demonstrators

outside the Government Agent's office, the protest leaders accused the military of using Tamil civilians as a human shield against the LTTE attacks.

The ongoing war has generated widespread opposition among the working class and the urban and rural poor, who have born the brunt of the fighting either directly or indirectly. The hostility to the war finds its reflection in the ranks of the troops, many of whom have only joined the army out of economic necessity. During the fighting in the Vanni last year, it was reported that many units simply broke up and fled or deserted en masse.

A recruitment drive for 15,000 additional soldiers launched earlier this year has proven to be a complete failure. Despite patriotic appeals by the military chiefs, the army was only able to recruit an extra 1,386 soldiers by the end of its deadline at the end of March. The lack of any will to fight in the army ranks no doubt contributed to the defeat at Elephant Pass, which in turn will further compound the low morale.

Significant sections of Sri Lankan big business have already been pushing for an end to the war, which they now regard as a major obstacle to foreign investment and the stabilisation of the economy. Norway, with the backing of the European Union, has begun to initiate talks between the government and the LTTE over a negotiated end to the war. But the two sides are as far apart as ever. The LTTE is fighting for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island, while the government and opposition are bogged down in discussions over possible constitutional changes involving a limited devolution of powers to provinces.

The latest military gains will only strengthen the position of the LTTE in rejecting any devolution package and demanding full independence. The LTTE's political adviser Anton Balasingham announced in *Tamil Guardian* on Saturday that the LTTE had invited a Norwegian delegation to visit Vanni to hold talks with its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran on facilitating negotiations with the Colombo regime.

Kumaratunga has increasingly been a politician without any clear policy, attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable: appealing to the Sinhala chauvinists by beating the war drums, while at the same time seeking to appease anti-war sentiment with promises of a peace deal. She has largely lost her own political base of support and rests on a fragile coalition of parties, including the Communist Party of Sri Lanka and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party. The loss at Elephant Pass makes her attempt to square the circle, politically speaking, even more untenable and could precipitate the collapse of the government, in conditions where the ruling class has no clear alternative.



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