

An air of desperation in Sri Lankan ruling circles as the LTTE makes further advances

Our correspondent

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The Sri Lankan army's decision on April 22 to make a "tactical withdrawal" from its heavily fortified base at Elephant Pass on the northern Jaffna peninsula has turned into a rout as the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have rapidly seized other key strategic positions in the area. Last weekend the LTTE overran the Pallai military camp, 15 kilometres north of Elephant Pass, and another major base at Pullopalai has also fallen.

The LTTE is now advancing its troops, mortars and artillery towards its stated objective of Jaffna—Sri Lanka's second largest city with a population of 500,000. The military have admitted that its key Kilali naval base on the southern coast of the peninsula is under mortar attack and may have already fallen. The LTTE also claims to have seized a 12-kilometre stretch of the Main Supply Route (MSR).

Reports are scanty as the Sri Lankan government maintains a ban on all journalists in the war zone. But it appears that LTTE troops are now 30 kilometres from Jaffna and moving into positions from which to train their artillery on the Palali air force base. The airfield is the only route—other than by sea—for the Sri Lankan military to either bring in supplies and reinforcements, or to evacuate their troops.

The Sri Lankan army appears to be on the brink of a military disaster. An estimated 35,000 to 40,000 troops out of the military's estimated total strength of 100,000 are now trapped on Jaffna peninsula with no land route out. They face a far smaller LTTE force but, following the fall of Elephant Pass, lack the equipment and the morale to fight. According to the Sri Lankan army commander, the LTTE now possesses more firepower than his own troops in the area.

UN officials stationed in Jaffna have already left the peninsula signaling other agencies will follow. CNN cited an international relief worker as saying: "There is tremendous uncertainty among the people here as they fear that coming days are going to be very bad." Over the past week, food prices have skyrocketed in the city by 50 to 100 percent. Other reports indicate that the military has started shifting their troops and heavy armaments towards Palali Air Force base in preparation for an evacuation.

The bitter civil war has been raging since 1983. The LTTE, which is fighting to establish a separate Tamil statelet in the

north and east of the country, held Jaffna and most of the peninsula from 1990 until December 1995 when the army retook the area. The latest LTTE offensive follows a series of rapid advances last October in the Vanni area during which the army lost a number of major bases as its troops fled.

In Colombo, the political and military establishment is in a state of paralysis. The generals are intent on proving that the defeats are not debacles, and that the fall of key strategic bases is simply a "tactical withdrawal". After the loss of Elephant Pass, the army announced that it was repositioning its lines of defence to the north and cited casualty figures of 80 soldiers and 8 officers dead. The next day the LTTE handed over 126 bodies to the International Red Cross. A week later when the new defence lines at Pallai collapsed, the army announced a figure of 13 dead and the LTTE handed over 45 bodies. Clearly the lying is to cover up a military situation, which is deteriorating by the day.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga returned from Britain last week and has admitted that the armed forces have suffered a setback, temporarily at least. She has since placed the country on a "war footing" suspending all "non-essential" development programs for three months to concentrate on holding on to Jaffna. The government is reportedly engaged in frantic talks with international arms dealers to replace equipment and munitions lost during the recent fighting. For the first time, all military reservists have been called up.

At the same time, however, her Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar is currently in New Delhi and has all but openly stated that Sri Lanka wants Indian military assistance, including help to rescue its troops from Jaffna, in the event that the LTTE advance continues. The Sri Lanka military simply does not have the naval and air capacity to rapidly evacuate 35,000 troops and equipment. He met with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday and was rebuffed. India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh stated bluntly that "military intervention by India in Sri Lanka is ruled out".

With parliamentary elections due in October, there have been bitter recriminations between the government and the opposition United National Party (UNP). The fall of Jaffna to the LTTE would be a huge political blow to Kumaratunga. She came to power in 1994 promising peace but systematically

intensified the war and prides herself on having seized Jaffna back from the LTTE in December 1995.

In an address to the nation on April 28, Kumaratunga tried to foist the blame for the military debacles onto the UNP. “I would like to mention here,” she said, “that it was due to the weak stance of the United National Party government in relation to military affairs, since 1983, that we had to inherit a weak military. At that time what happened was that the government fortified the LTTE instead of the armed forces.”

The UNP has been quick to blame the government. UNP Chairman Karu Jayasuriya issued a statement on April 23 saying: “The camp [Elephant Pass] was lost not because of any incompetence of the soldiers but the government which conducts the war according to its political interest.” UNP leader Wickremesinghe added his piece two days later, commenting: “The Kumaratunga administration and some incompetent military officers were responsible for the fall of Elephant Pass.”

But there has also been considerable pressure in ruling circles for the formation of a government of national unity. An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* on April 27 commented: “Sadly, having returned here (from his trip abroad) Mr. Wickremesinghe has begun sounding discordant notes instead of throwing in his lot with the government to deal with the crisis. He has put the entire blame for the Elephant Pass debacle on the government and made certain remarks that provide moral courage to the terrorists and not the security forces. In fact the whole nation should be beholden to them for their heroic struggle to preserve the country's integrity.”

On April 29, Kumaratunga invited the opposition leader and the UNP for closed-door talks about the military situation. The government also lifted a ban it had imposed on the dispatch of medicines and medical equipment organised by the UNP to military hospitals after Wickremesinghe called on the media to defy the current military censorship. On his part, Wickremesinghe agreed not to divulge matters discussed at the meeting with Kumaratunga.

The talks took place yesterday and even though both sides agreed not to discuss their contents, it is clear that they are moving towards some form of temporary coalition. A UNP statement has called for the formation of a war council comprising competent senior military officers “not only to defend the territorial integrity of the country but also to maintain law and order.” Other press reports quoting “authoritative sources” indicated that Kumaratunga was proposing a National Defence Council to include the president, prime minister, opposition leader, the speaker and the parliamentary leaders of political parties.

Such a regime of national unity would inevitably mean not only an intensification of the war but also further attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class and oppressed masses, both Tamil and Sinhalese. Kumaratunga's decision to suspend “non-essential” development projects is a clear message that the workers and farmers are going to be

forced to sacrifice for the war effort. Already there have been calls in the Colombo media for the imposition of military conscription to fill out the ranks of an army depleted by casualties and desertions and unable to get volunteers.

At the same time, an atmosphere of hysterical anti-Tamil chauvinism is being stirred up in Colombo by Sinhala chauvinist groups who accuse both the PA government and the UNP opposition of conniving to “divide the motherland”. On April 26, fascistic elements organised in Sinhala Veera Vidahana (Sinhala Heroes Forum) and the National Movement Against Terrorism launched a new party named Sinhala Urumaya Pakshaya (Sinhala Heritage Party).

These Sinhala chauvinists, who recently demonstrated against attempts by Norway to facilitate negotiations between the government and the LTTE, have now joined the agitation for foreign military intervention. In a bizarre political twist, the National Buddhist Sangha Council, made up of the country's top Buddhist monks, this week also demanded that India send troops to prevent Jaffna falling into LTTE hands. In 1987, the monks protested vigorously against the dispatch of Indian troops to Jaffna under the Indo-Lankan Accord.

In its editorial yesterday, the *Island* newspaper called for military assistance both from India and the US. “Today, Indo-Sri Lanka relations are at the very best. Indo-US relations have undergone a dramatic transformation in the last decade and this was evident during the recent successful visit by President Clinton to India. Both US and India are committed to the hilt to fight international terrorism. If that commitment was sincere shouldn't that commitment be expressed in more tangible ways?”

For the time being India has turned down Sri Lanka's appeal and the Kumaratunga government has not made a request to the US, publicly at least. But in what is clearly a turning point in the 17-year war, and in conditions of shifting strategic arrangements throughout the Indian subcontinent, a major intervention either diplomatic or military cannot be ruled out.



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