

Fighting erupts again as Sri Lankan government imposes censorship clampdown

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10 May 2000

Fighting in the north of Sri Lanka broke out again on Tuesday after the Peoples Alliance (PA) government in Colombo rejected an offer by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a temporary ceasefire to allow the withdrawal of between 35,000 and 40,000 army troops from the Jaffna peninsula.

The official government spokesman and censor Ariya Rubasinghe announced that the military had repulsed two LTTE attacks on the army's defensive positions just 25 kilometres southwest of Jaffna town—Sri Lanka's second largest city of 500,000. “During early hours of the morning, terrorists in large numbers launched two consecutive attacks on the troops manning defences,” he said. The first clash had lasted 30 minutes and the second 15 minutes. The LTTE had been armed with machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

But it is not clear how much credence the story has, because the only available reports are official government briefings. Last week the Sri Lankan government introduced draconian censorship regulations as part of new emergency powers to suppress strikes and protests, and to allow the military to compulsorily requisition equipment and personnel for the war. Even prior to the new censorship regime, journalists were not permitted in the war zone. There are no telephone links to Jaffna city, other than through military channels.

The government is desperately trying to revive the morale of an army that has just suffered a series of humiliating defeats with the fall of the strategic Elephant Pass army base on April 22 and the Pallai army base to the north a week later. Prior to each of these defeats military spokesmen attempted to put the best possible face on what was a disastrous situation. The army was routed by LTTE forces that were smaller, lacked heavy armour and had no air support.

The army cannot afford to allow the LTTE to advance any further northwards as that would enable the separatists to position their long-range artillery to shell Palali airport which is crucial both for the rapid resupply of troops and evacuation. Military sources contacted by the *Times of India* indicated that the army had concentrated its forces to fight to hold Palali. Even when the LTTE controlled Jaffna city between 1990 and 1995, the Sri Lankan army retained this key facility.

The government has announced that it has purchased new arms and ammunition to help fortify the army's positions on the Jaffna peninsula. Last week in what was interpreted as a means of getting access to fresh military supplies, the government announced the reestablishment of diplomatic links with Israel. Although India has ruled out any military assistance to Colombo, Indian air force chief Anil Yaswant Tipnis is currently in Sri Lanka and has held talks with President Chandrika Kumaratunga. A Russian military delegation also arrived in Colombo this week.

Another *Times of India* report gave an indication of the chaos in the government-held northern Jaffna peninsula. “According to social organisations here [in India] aiding the Tamil refugees and from the information trickling in through the refugees who have landed and through relatives of the refugees, food and other civil supply are fast depleting in the area. The capture of the Elephant Pass by the militants has cut the source of water supply for these people. Between gun shots and bombing in the region, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to find their way out to the Mannar coast to escape.”

The LTTE's offer on Monday of a ceasefire—in effect, for the government to surrender control of Jaffna peninsula—was no doubt calculated to sow further

demoralisation within Sri Lankan army ranks, comprised mainly of rural youth from the country's south, many of whom have enlisted for economic reasons. It stated that the ceasefire was "to prevent the further escalation of violence and a bloodbath" but warned that a rejection would have "disastrous consequences of heavy military losses".

Significantly the government did not initially reject the ceasefire out of hand. "There is no comment right now. We will let you know our response after we have gone through the proposal," spokesman Rubasinghe said. Yesterday, however, the government announced in strident terms that there would be no withdrawal from Jaffna peninsula. In a nationally televised address, Kumaratunga stated: "We will leave no room for the LTTE to again fasten their fascist grip on half a million Tamil people in Jaffna."

Having presided over a military debacle, Deputy Defence Minister Anuradha Ratwatte told parliament yesterday: "We will fight to the last man. In a war situation, there may be temporary setbacks. That does not mean that the war is lost altogether." Then he blustered: "We will not only defend Jaffna but we will also retake the Elephant Pass army camp."

After the fall of Elephant Pass, the opposition United National Party (UNP) originally called for a debate over the war and warned that it would vote against an extension of the longstanding state of emergency throughout the country. But in the event, the UNP MPs fell into line with the government, abstained on the vote and took no action against the new extended emergency regulations promulgated last week.

Already a number of organisations have voiced opposition to the new censorship regulations, which make it compulsory for all journalists, including foreign correspondents, to submit their copy to the government censor before publication.

The Editor's Guild has denounced the censorship as a "flagrant violation of the freedom of expression of the people" and said it would take legal action if the regulations were not amended. The Newspaper Society of Sri Lanka urged the government to lift the bans, saying that the press was mature enough to conduct itself with responsibility at a time of national crisis.

Paris-based organisation Reporters Without Borders (RWB) issued a statement demanding the lifting of the censorship rules and calling on the government to

ensure the security of journalists working in Sri Lanka. RWB spokesman Vincent Brossel said: "The military situation is very critical, but I'm not sure that imposing these draconian laws is the right solution."

Already the emergency powers have been used to prevent protests and rallies. The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) called off a protest against the new regulations yesterday after the government banned it. On the same day, however, 300 members of the newly-formed chauvinist Sinhala Heritage Party, ardent supporters of the war, were able to gather in Colombo and only broke up after a series of half-hearted attempts by the police to disperse them.

Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera told foreign correspondents last week that the censorship would be for "this critical period but won't be for months, only weeks." But given the desperate military situation in the north and the widespread anti-government hostility in the south, it is highly unlikely that Kumaratunga will voluntarily lift the regulations in the short term.



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