

Sri Lankan government bans live TV and radio broadcasts as the military crisis deepens in Jaffna

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Amid a deteriorating military situation for its armed forces in the north of Sri Lanka, the Peoples Alliance government in Colombo has banned all live broadcasts of television and radio programs. The new restrictions, which cover not only reports on the war but all political issues, amount to a desperate bid by a panicky government to suppress any public debate.

The new media regulations announced on Thursday came just over a week after the government promulgated sweeping emergency measures including tough censorship restrictions, a ban on all strikes and protests, and the power to requisition equipment, buildings and personnel. Janadasa Peris, chairman of the government-owned Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) explained: "Pre-recorded radio and television programs, including chat shows with political content, would have to be submitted to the government censor for approval."

Peris also announced that the SLBC had suspended its broadcast of Sinhala and Tamil language news programs from the BBC because they were being relayed live. A previous attempt to block the BBC programs had failed because a contract with the SLBC stipulated that the broadcasts be relayed in full. The PA government had objected to the BBC's quotes from statements by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the organisation fighting for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the country.

Despite the government attempts to minimise the military's losses, it is clear even from its own reports that the LTTE has struck further blows against a demoralised army of between 35,000 and 40,000 caught on the northern tip of the Jaffna peninsula. Fierce fighting has taken place over the last three days on the outskirts of Jaffna town, Sri Lanka's second largest city of 500,000. (*See map below*)

On Wednesday evening, the LTTE announced that it had captured the crucial bridge at Navatkali on the main supply route only three kilometres southeast of Jaffna. While the

official government spokesman denied that the bridge had fallen, the military has admitted that the LTTE has made inroads at nearby Ariyalai and Columbutthai forcing government troops to "readjust the defence lines" after a five hour battle. Fighting is also taking place at Thankilappu.

The last time that the army "readjusted its defence lines" was on April 22 when it pulled out between 15,000 and 20,000 troops from its strategic Elephant Pass base at the southern end of the Jaffna peninsula. The following week the Pallai army base fell. At the beginning of this week, the military were claiming that they had consolidated their defence lines at Kilali about 25 kilometres southeast of Jaffna. In parliament, the Deputy Defence Minister Anuradha Ratwatte insisted that the army would not only defend Jaffna but drive the LTTE back beyond Elephant Pass.

But shortly after the government rejected an LTTE offer of a temporary ceasefire to withdraw all government troops from Jaffna, the separatists opened up a fresh offensive. They appear to have been able to evade Sri Lankan naval patrols and ferry fresh fighters across Jaffna lagoon from the Wannu region to the south of the peninsula and effectively outflank government forces at Kilali. The government claims to have hit back at LTTE supply and communication facilities at Poonerya in the Wannu.

As the military debacle has proceeded over the last three weeks, there are discernable divisions opening up in the military hierarchy itself. Contacted by the BBC Sinhala service *Sandeshaya* on Wednesday, the army commander in charge of Jaffna, Brigadier Janaka Perera claimed that the fighting at Ariyalai and Thankilappu was not due to a new LTTE offensive but rather was the result of LTTE cadre already in the area. Perera, who was appointed to the post just two days after the fall of Elephant Pass, was clearly trying to palm off responsibility for the new attacks on his immediate predecessors for allowing the LTTE to function in an area so close to Jaffna. His comments were a slap in

the face to the commanders of the Army, Navy and Air Force who were directed by the president to go to Jaffna to take personal charge of operations 10 days before the defeat at Elephant Pass.

The fighting at Ariyalai brings the LTTE forces one step closer to the key Palali airbase—the Sri Lankan military's only means of supplying and evacuating its troops. According to an article in India's *Hindu* newspaper, "The rebels have another route along the southeastern arm of the peninsula with a presence at Nagar Kovil, from which a further advance would take them to Point Pedro. Further advances along these sectors would bring the northern Palali airbase within the rebel artillery range."

The LTTE warned civilians in Jaffna to either evacuate or take cover as its troops are on the point of entering the city. Hundreds of Jaffna residents are reported to have already fled to areas west of the city or boarded flimsy boats bound for southern India—just 35 kilometres away across the dangerous Palk Straits. In Colombo, the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) has accused the PA government and the army of trying to use the residents of Jaffna as a human shield to protect its beleaguered troops from LTTE attack.

In an exhortation to the troops yesterday, Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga said that the 17-year civil war had reached a "decisive point". Dredging up the exploits of ancient Sinhala kings, she said that they had suffered defeats "but each time they faced setbacks, they faced the enemy with renewed strength and achieved victory." She assured the soldiers that they would be provided with the "most modern armaments, equipment and technology". The Sri Lankan government has just announced a \$24 million deal with Israel, after recently resuming diplomatic relations, for the supply of eight Kfir fighter planes.

But the major problem facing the generals in Colombo and Jaffna is not so much equipment or even troop numbers but morale. Retired Indian Lieutenant General A.S. Kalkat, who headed the Indian military intervention in Sri Lanka in 1987, made an obvious point in an article in the Indian magazine *Outlook*:

"The strength of SLA [Sri Lankan Army] troops in Jaffna is three times more than what's needed to defend the part under their control, then why panic? Unless something's been kept away from public knowledge, like the total collapse of the military's morale and danger of its disintegration, or a justification to seek military involvement from outside the region which India's been wary of. If it's the former, then the conflict's reached a decisive stage and a far greater danger looms because instead of attacking and capturing Jaffna town, the LTTE may decide to just

surround it and capture the airfield and Kankesanthurai port... Such a move could result in total capitulation of the forces and [a] large quantity of arms and equipment falling into LTTE's hands."

There are other indications of a collapse of morale. Despite the wall of censorship in Colombo, a TV broadcast in Australia showed interviews last week with wounded Sri Lankan soldiers in the capital's hospitals—with all of them opposing the war. Many of the troops are drawn from impoverished village youth who have enlisted as they lack any prospect of a job and because the military offers their families an attractive pension in the event that they are killed.

India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee reiterated on Thursday that his government would not provide any military assistance to Sri Lanka—even in the event that the LTTE seizes Jaffna. "If Jaffna falls to the LTTE it will not be the first time," he told reporters. The Kumaratunga government has appealed to New Delhi for military aid and also for assistance to evacuate the SLA troops should that prove necessary. The Indian government, however, has stated that it will provide only "humanitarian assistance" and has offered to mediate in the war on the condition that both Colombo and the LTTE make the request.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the fighting in Jaffna in the days and weeks ahead, the deterioration in the military situation has already created a profound political crisis for the PA government. To prosecute the war and impose the emergency regulations, Kumaratunga is relying on the support of all her allies in the ruling coalition including the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). She is also dependent upon the acquiescence of the opposition United National Party (UNP).

Increasingly Kumaratunga is embracing openly Sinhala racist and fascistic parties including the Sinhala Heritage Party, the Sinhala Heroes Forum, the National Ideology Group and Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (Peoples United Front). All of these organisations have publicly supported the government's decision to put the country on "a war footing". In a national radio and TV speech on May 9 the president openly expressed her thanks to these extreme rightwing groups. Significantly, her broadcast was made only in Sinhala, not Tamil or English.

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