

# LTTE makes further gains in Sri Lankan fighting

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have made further inroads into the Sri Lankan army's defences on the north of the Jaffna peninsula over the last few days. Government sources have admitted that two key targets—the Palali airbase and the nearby Kankasanturai port—have been hit by artillery shells. (See map below)

The port and the airbase are the only facilities for supplying or evacuating an estimated 35,000 Sri Lankan army troops locked in battle for the control of Jaffna. The Palali airbase, which is also the army's main fuel and ammunition depot, has never fallen in the course of the country's bitter 17-year war, even when the LTTE separatists controlled Jaffna town and much of the peninsula between 1990 and 1995.

The *Times of India* newspaper reported today that more than 10 shells had fallen on the airbase over the last two or three days. According to the LTTE's web site, its fighters have advanced to Kopay Veli just 12 kilometres from Palali and are using 122mm howitzers captured from the Sri Lankan army. It claims to have hit the runway as well as the main communications tower. The government denied the reports but then stated that its troops had built new bunkers to reinforce the base's defences.

According to the same *Times of India* article, two shells have also fallen near Kankasanturai port, 5 kilometres west of the airbase. "Military officials reached by telephone said that the port was not damaged, but said it was alarming that it was within the rebels' artillery range," the article stated. It then added: "Military experts said the fall of Jaffna was likely within the next week. Analysts say that the sharp fall in the morale of the Sri Lankan forces and the unplanned retreats taken by them, may hasten the fall of this northeastern, capital town."

Due to the paucity of information, the precise military situation is difficult to determine. The Sri Lankan government has imposed a censorship blackout on the Colombo media and no journalists are permitted in the war zone. The government's own official reports since the fall of the key Elephant Pass army base on April 22 have proven to be completely inaccurate time and again. But the picture that has emerged over the last three weeks is one of considerable chaos and demoralisation in the Sri Lankan army ranks as the LTTE has steadily advanced to

the outskirts of Jaffna town.

Fighting over the last week has taken place at Ariyalai, Kaithadi, Colombuthurai and Thanankillappu all to the east or south east of Jaffna town. On Thursday, the LTTE claimed to have taken the important army base of Kaithadi just five kilometres to the east of Jaffna and to have seized sections of two main roads in the area. "Kaithadi garrison town, with its heavily fortified military bases, fell to the fighting forces of the Liberation Tigers after 12 hours of ferocious combat," the LTTE website announced. The LTTE has called on Sri Lankan troops in Jaffna to surrender.

The government has denied the report but its Special Media Information Centre (SMIC), established after imposing stringent censorship on May 3, made the following observation about the fighting at nearby Ariyalai: "Several attempts by the terrorists to advance eastwards from the Ariyalai area were contained by the security forces by readjusting the defended localities". "Readjusting" defence lines has become the current army codeword for a military retreat.

Colombo has been spending billions of rupees over the past three weeks to purchase new fighter aircraft and other military supplies from Israel, Pakistan and other countries. The military stated on Friday that new equipment had been moved to Jaffna for use in the current fighting.

There are indications, however, in the Indian press that the Sri Lankan army may be preparing for a mass evacuation of its troops from the Jaffna peninsula. The Sri Lankan Chief of Defence Staff General Rohan Daluwatte, who retired last year and was reappointed to his position following the fall of Elephant Pass, visited India this week in what was officially described as "a private visit". He met, however, with the Indian top brass in the southern city of Bangalore, reportedly to seek India's assistance.

According to a report on the Indian *Rediff.com* website: "Naval officials disclosed that General Daluwatte has come with an urgent mission with two goals. First, since the Indian government has declined to intervene in the civil war in Jaffna, General Daluwatte will discuss all other logistical support and indirect assistance that India could rush to the beleaguered Sri Lankan troops. Second, he is likely to request the IAF's (Indian Air Force's) backup protection and escort for the Sri Lankan

army's supplies to the troops in Jaffna.”

Evacuation plans are being openly discussed in the Indian press. A report in Friday's *Hindu* newspaper stated: “India, on its part, is ready with contingency plans. Indian ships are set to evacuate trapped Sri Lankan soldiers or Tamil refugees in case of an LTTE thrust in Jaffna. Meanwhile, the combined Navy and Coast Guard surveillance exercise, code-named ‘Tasha,’ gathered further momentum with another Coast Guard ship joining the vigil around Tuticorin.”

An article in Thursday's *Deccan Herald* provided details of the extensive operation. “They [Southern Naval Command] are planning for contingencies, including evacuating trapped Sri Lankan troops from Palali and also large scale refugee migration from across the Palk Straits... Minesweepers, landing tank ships and Kashin class destroyers have been positioned around the east coast near Chennai [Madras]. Contingency plans include using LST's for establishing beachheads for ground troops or for evacuating people trapped along the coast. TU-142 long range maritime patrol aircraft are flying reconnaissance missions off the eastern seaboard from Arakonam while Do-228 surveillance aircraft keep watch on the coast areas, sources said.”

A further sign of developing military links between India and Sri Lanka is the visit to Colombo by former Punjab police chief K.P.S. Gill. Known in India as the “supercop” for his ruthless suppression of secessionist movements in the Punjab and the northeastern Indian state of Assam, Gill has been invited to advise the government on ministerial security. There is no doubt, however, that his visit, undertaken with the approval of the Indian government, will also include broader discussions on the suppression of the LTTE.

Gill's visit, which begins today, follows a trip just a week ago by the Indian Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Tipnis, who also downplayed the significance of his discussions. The low-key nature of these “private” visits is in line with the Indian government's official position ruling out any direct military assistance or involvement in Sri Lanka. The National Democratic Alliance government in New Delhi includes a number of Tamil-based coalition partners from the southern state of Tamil Nadu that are supportive of the LTTE and hostile to any Indian military backing for Colombo.

At the same time, however, the Indian government is concerned that an LTTE victory would fuel separatist movements in Jammu & Kashmir and other parts of India. It is also under pressure from the US and other major powers to intervene more directly to shore up the Sri Lankan government—either through brokering a peace deal or possibly even militarily. In a statement on Tuesday, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Karl Inderfuth said that the US was “well aware of the legitimate interest that India has in Sri Lanka.” “We believe that India is the key outside power and that anything to be done by the international community must be done very much with India.”

This week the European Union issued a formal call for the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to end the fighting and begin to negotiate. Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Raymond Johansen is due in Colombo for three days next week and will be accompanied by special envoy Erik Solheim who met with Indian officials in New Delhi recently. Norway has been involved for months in attempting to convene talks.

In Jaffna itself, the conditions for up to 500,000 Tamil residents have deteriorated rapidly. The LTTE has called on the city's population to move into safer areas to the west. The government has imposed a strict daily curfew, which is lifted only for three hours from 9am, prompting an accusation from the LTTE that the army is using the residents as a human shield to protect its beleaguered soldiers.

Many residents have been displaced more than once before and are reluctant to leave despite the danger. A sizeable portion of the population left en masse in December 1995 when the Sri Lankan army retook the city from the LTTE. When they returned to their homes they found that their belongings, as well as all removable material from the buildings, such as roofing sheets or tiles, windows and doors, were missing.

After heavy fighting this week at Ariyalai and Colombuthurai within the municipal limits of Jaffna, a number of families have moved to the northwest of the city and are sheltering in schools. According to reports, there are 200 families at Kokuvil Hindu Primary School, 60 at Kokuvil Gnanapandithar School, 50 at Thirunelveli Muththuthamby School, 20 at Thirunelveli Tamil mixed school and 50 at Kokuvil Ramakrishna School. Jaffna University women's hostel has also shifted to Maruthanamadam while the Jaffna hospital is almost deserted. According to a Red Cross spokesman there are only 39 patients in the 1,000-bed hospital.

A report in the *Hindu* newspaper quoted UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond. He said that more than 4,000 Tamil refugees were crammed into five camps in Jaffna, with little in the way of water and sanitation facilities. Some children were suffering from malaria, chickenpox and diarrhea. Aid agencies said that 75 percent of Jaffna's civilian population has already started to flee to safer parts of the peninsula. The conditions facing thousands of people will worsen as fighting continues.

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