

Renewed fighting in northern Sri Lanka undermines push for a negotiated deal

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Fighting has again flared on the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka between the beleaguered army troops and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) scuttling any immediate possibility of negotiations. Sri Lankan forces have attempted to go on the offensive for the first time since the loss of the key Elephant Pass base in April in a bid to push LTTE forces back from positions threatening Palaly air base and the seaport of Kankasanthurai (KKS).

According to latest government reports, continuous LTTE mortar and artillery attacks have disrupted the operation of the KKS seaport. By the end of last week LTTE mortar fire had forced security forces to close Palaly to fixed wing aircraft. As a result the main supply routes for personnel and war materials have been severely disrupted raising the prospect of a further military debacle for the estimated 25,000 troops still on the peninsula. All land routes to and from Jaffna are under LTTE control.

Earlier in the week the military lost two vessels in a naval clash near Mulaithivu. LTTE boats attacked a convoy that included two vessels carrying 300 government soldiers to the northern war front. Although the navy was able to prevent the “Sea Tigers” from reaching the troop vessels, the LTTE sank an Israeli built fast attack craft (FAC) and another was destroyed in a mistaken attack by the Sri Lankan air force.

The Sri Lankan army attempted to hit back late last week by launching an attack on LTTE positions at Sarasalai near the Kanagan Puliady junction in the Chavakachcheri area. The government special media information centre announced that the army destroyed a number of LTTE bunkers and inflicted heavy casualties on their fighters. At least 25 government soldiers, including an officer, were killed in the attack and

another 50 were injured. The LTTE claimed that it had repulsed the attack and forced the army to retreat to its previous positions. There are no independent reports due to stringent government censorship and a ban on all journalists visiting the war zones.

An LTTE statement issued in London on June 10 listed the names of eight civilians who were killed and 16 who were wounded in attacks by the army using its newly acquired multi-barrel rockets and Israeli Kafir fighter jets. Among the dead were a two-year-old child and a 70-year-old woman. The LTTE urged the International Red Cross and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to organise a ceasefire to permit the evacuation of hospitals in the area, saying that the army was pounding all evacuation routes. The military have rejected the call claiming that the LTTE would use the ceasefire to evacuate their casualties.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the attack, it is clear that the “offensive” was launched as part of a desperate bid to bolster the army's morale and the flagging political fortunes of the Peoples Alliance government in Colombo. In a radio interview on June 3, Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte said the security forces were suffering from a “withdrawal syndrome.” According to the *Sunday Times* newspaper, President Chandrika Kumaratunga gleefully told a delegation of Tamil parties earlier in the month: “I have good news for you. The forces are advancing towards Ariyalai. They are coming out of their defence lines.”

The PA government has attempted to paint a picture of normalcy in Jaffna town, easing the 24-hour curfew to 17 hours on June 3. But the situation is far from normal. More than 70,000 out of an estimated 110,000 residents left Jaffna town in the first weeks of May. They flocked to temples, churches, schools and public

buildings in the small towns southwest of the provincial capital. According to non-government organisations, only about 40 percent of the displaced have returned to Jaffna town. Hundreds of displaced persons from the Chavakachcheri area are housed in 14 centres at Point Pedro in the north east of the peninsula. Thousands more are trapped in the Chavakachcheri area where fighting has been concentrated.

In late May, after a string of military victories, the LTTE issued an ultimatum to the army to surrender or face a “blood bath”. However, the deadline came and went and until last week fighting had been intermittent. Some military analysts speculated that the LTTE offensive was running out of fighters and firepower but there has also been considerable international political pressure on the LTTE to end the fighting and begin talks with the government.

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh was in Colombo this week for a round of discussions with the government and opposition. His visit was the outcome of demands by the US and the European Union that India play the major role in patching together a deal between the government and the LTTE. To the obvious delight of the Kumaratunga government, he emphasised that India, in line with the US and Europe, would not countenance a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island—the LTTE’s central objective. At the end of May, senior US State Department official Thomas Pickering delivered the same message on behalf of the Clinton administration.

The prospect of any talks appears slim. Despite occasional gestures about the need for a negotiated settlement, the PA government has hardened its position and intensified its jingoistic rhetoric. In a BBC interview on June 5 Kumaratunga said: “Now there is no question of talking (with the LTTE) unless certain conditions are fulfilled.” She did not specify what conditions.

At the same time, Deputy Defence Minister Ratwatte has launched a vitriolic attack on an “anti-war campaign” previously encouraged by sections of the ruling alliance to try to contain the mounting popular opposition to the bitter 17-year war. He denounced the campaign, saying that it had “demoralised soldiers” and “discouraged young people joining the army.” He went on to justify the war as the only means of achieving peace, complaining: “They keep saying that the war is

cruel, war is bad. Perhaps they were not aware that this war is an extension of a political strategy to bring peace to the country.”

In recent weeks, the government has spent lavishly on new military equipment, including the Israeli Kfir jets and sophisticated naval attack boats. The naval vessels are equipped with the latest computer-guided weapon systems enabling the crews to direct attacks on targets as far away as 34 miles. According to the *Sunday Times*, the army has now received Multi Barrel Rocket Launchers (MBRL) from Pakistan. Moreover, the Czech Republic has donated 24 MBRLs containing 40 barrels each and China has donated two to the Sri Lankan army.

By pouring in new and costly weapons, the PA government is hoping to at least stall further LTTE advances and possibly recapture some of the areas previously lost. By clinging onto Jaffna and relying on international pressure to bring the LTTE to the bargaining table, the PA government is hoping to be able to get the upper hand in any talks and at the same time bolster its own position in the leadup to national elections later in the year.



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