Over 300 dead and 1,000 injured

Sri Lankan government launches a major military offensive to boost its electoral prospects

A correspondent
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In a calculated attempt to bolster her government's prospects in Sri Lanka's general election next month, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, also the country's defence minister, launched a large-scale army offensive last weekend aimed at taking back areas of the Jaffna peninsula captured by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in April and May.

After two months of relative calm, the Sri Lankan army used its recently purchased multi-barrel rocket launchers, backed by heavy artillery and MiG-2 bombers, in an attempt to penetrate LTTE-held areas on the outskirts of Jaffna town—Ariyalai, Colombuthurai, Mulli, Boompuhar and Manianthottam. The military also tried to seize Sarasali, Maduvil and Meesalai in the Chavakachcheri area further to the south.

According to the official reports, the army achieved its objectives. The government, however, maintains tough media censorship including a virtual blackout on military operations. No journalists are permitted to independently visit and report from the war zones. There is every reason to believe that the operation ran into tough opposition. Even by its own accounts, the army had to withstand two LTTE counter-offensives at Colombuthurai. Except for sporadic exchanges the government's operation had ground to a halt by Wednesday.

The human cost of the fighting has been heavy. The government's Special Media Information Center (SMIC) in Colombo announced that the army had lost 114 dead, including nine officers, with another 766 injured. The SMIC put the LTTE losses at 230 dead and more than 300 injured. One newspaper reported that some of the bodies of the LTTE casualties being handed back via the International Red Cross were mutilated beyond recognition as a result of the heavy firepower employed by the army.

The offensive has produced a new flood of refugees. People living around Chundikuli and Jaffna Kachcheri (the administrative centre) have been forced to move. Schools including Chundikuli Girls College, Holy Family Convent, Nallur Vigneswara School and St. John Bosco were closed on Monday morning. Monday was also the last day for the acceptance of nominations for the election but, because of the bombing, officers who reported for work were told to return home after signing the attendance register.

Heavy shelling near Kopay and Irupalai on Tuesday night resulted in the death of Nadarajah Nandarani (23) at Kopay, a few miles from Jaffna town. Another five people, including a seven-year-old child, were injured when a shell exploded over their home. They were S. Subramaniam (75), V. Rajaratnam (70), V. Rani (30), M. Amirtharajah (7) and E. Thusyanthi (25).

The government issued a statement saying the offensive had been launched to "expand" areas controlled by the security forces at Colombuthurai "in order to give better protection to the city of Jaffna". But the comments of the military's spokesman Sanath Karunaratne indicate the pointlessness of the operation from a military standpoint. "It cannot be denied that the loss of lives was greater than what was achieved," he told the Jaffna-based Tamil language daily *Udayan*. "There is no point in capturing mere territory" with such high casualties, he added.

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The purpose of the army's offensive was transparently political. The fall of the key Elephant Pass army base in late April and the LTTE's subsequent gains on the Jaffna peninsula were huge blows to Kumaratunga who had staked her reputation on the army's advances since she came to power in 1994.

Under pressure from the major powers and sections of big business, Kumaratunga attempted to push through a series of constitutional changes as the basis for negotiations with the LTTE. But when the constitutional package failed to get the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament last month, she called the elections early and has been appealing directly to Sinhala chauvinism, accusing the opposition of being in league with the LTTE.

There is every indication that the latest army offensive was organised well in advance to achieve the maximum political advantage for the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA). Newly appointed prime minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, a known racialist, recently told a meeting in Gampola, a central hill town: “We have purchased a modernised bomber plane to destroy the LTTE once and for all. Through this plane we will pour bombs on the LTTE's positions.”

The new armed forces commander Lieutenant General Lionel Balagalle, who assumed office on August 25 after a major reshuffle of the military's top base, announced: “There will be a new military move to recover the lost areas including Elephant Pass.”

On August 27, the Colombo-based *Sunday Times* reported that the Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte had flown to Jaffna to oversee a series of top-level security meetings. As the newspaper's defence analyst commented: “...a military victory before the election will certainly be a plus factor for the government. Contrary to earlier thinking, this seems to be a strong likelihood now.” Top military officials including the Chief of Defence Staff General Rohan de S. Daluwatte were already in Jaffna.

The government's claim that the military operation was necessary to secure the area for the election is a threadbare pretext for the offensive. The poll is being held under conditions of social chaos in which tens of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes. The International Committee of the Red Cross recently reported that about 160,000 people had been displaced as a result of fighting this year in the north of Sri Lanka.

Furthermore there is not even the semblance of democracy in these northern areas where the security forces have imposed what amounts to martial law. Detentions and “disappearances” are regular occurrences. S. Sridhar, the coordinator of the Human Rights Commission, who visited a military division at Vavuniya, just to the south of the Jaffna peninsula, stated that 38 people, including two women, have been detained as “LTTE suspects”. Of the 38 detainees, 25 are below the age of 25 years.

On September 2, Amnesty International called on the Sri Lankan government to investigate the increasing number of people who have been detained by the military and “disappeared”. “Seven people who were last seen in the hands of the security forces in Vavuniya between August 10 and 16 have ‘disappeared' bringing the total number of disappearances in that town to nine this year,” it stated. According to Amnesty International, it has “received reports of at least 540 cases of disappearances” since Kumaratunga assumed power in 1994.

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that Kumaratunga has squandered hundreds of lives, both Tamil and Sinhalese, left many others maimed for life and displaced thousands in a military operation aimed at winning a few votes from the most rightwing organisations and social layers.

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