

Sri Lankan government intensifies military offensive in the lead-up to election day

S. Rajendran
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With just over a week to go before the Sri Lankan general election, the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) is seeking to outdo Sinhala extremist parties and groups by promising to pursue the country's protracted civil war and to militarily destroy the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Appearing on national television on Monday, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake said that the government had shelved its planned package of constitutional reforms and was giving priority to its military efforts against the LTTE. Wickramanayake was only installed in August shortly after the government failed to obtain the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament to pass the devolution package, which was aimed at a negotiated end to the war. He has played an increasingly prominent role in the election campaign.

His comments underscore the cynicism with which the government has launched a series of military offensives on the northern Jaffna peninsula over the last month. The army operations, planned well in advance, coincided with the beginning of the election campaign and are aimed at bolstering the military credentials of the Peoples Alliance after a string of defeats, including the loss of the key Elephant Pass base in April.

Wickramanayake has been bragging about the army's latest advances and promised to take back all of the LTTE's territorial gains by election day on October 10. He told an election meeting: "The army is demolishing the LTTE strongholds and recapturing areas which the terrorist group captured in April. They [the army] have recaptured several crucial areas inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. The aim of the armed forces is to recapture Elephant Pass by the day we go to the polls."

"We will not declare a ceasefire at any cost. We will fight on and destroy the enemy and thereafter, with the

peace-loving sections of the Tamil community in the north, restore peace. Until then the war will go on with added vigour," he insisted.

In the same vein, the Deputy Defence Minister General Anuruddha Ratwatte has turned down requests by Tamil political parties for a temporary halt in the fighting to enable them to campaign in the North and East, by saying: "We can't stop the war for the sake of the elections. The war will continue and the election also will take place."

The impact of the fighting has been devastating. Hundreds of soldiers have been killed on both sides and thousands have been wounded. An estimated 200,000 people have already fled from the areas affected by the war.

The armed forces have made limited gains. On September 17, they took back Chavakachcheri, the second largest city in the peninsula, and last week they had captured Kolumbuthurai, Sarasalai, and north Maduvil. All of these areas are close to Jaffna town—the provincial capital.

The LTTE has launched its own counter-attacks under the codename Ceaseless Wave 4 and has made small advances on the army's forward defence lines at the Kilali and Nagarkovil bases to the south of Jaffna town and has started attacking the Eluthumaduval military complex.

The PA has sought to make as much political capital as it can out of the army's advances. The government enforces a rigid censorship over military operations and has banned all reporters from the war zones in the North and East. But after the fall of Chavakachcheri, the military organised a special tour of the area for journalists—both foreign and local—to show off their conquest.

What emerged, however, is a grim picture. The army

has used its newly acquired firepower to flatten houses and other buildings, destroy coconut plantations and turn the city into a virtual ghost town. Photographs published in the Colombo newspapers showed schools, hospitals, market places and shopping centers in ruins.

One journalist said that he had seen no human beings around Chavakachcheri—only a goat searching for food. Another stated that the towns and villages were “becoming a dead land. Trees and crops are destroyed and there is a threat of it becoming a desert... It looks like an area hit by an earthquake. Aerial bombing and Multi-Barrel Rocket Launchers (MBRL) have ruined the towns and villages.”

Reports indicate that a number of villages in the area, including Meesalai, Navatkuli, Kaithady, Nunavil, Madduvil, Ariyalai, Maravanpuloa and Kovilakandy, have been destroyed.

The government has spent an estimated 51 billion rupees—doubling the military procurement budget—to bolster the military following the fall of Elephant Pass. The new weaponry, which includes Kefir jet fighters, 10 MI-24 helicopter gunships, MBRLs and artillery and surface-to-surface guns fitted to the navy's offshore patrol vessels, has been used with devastating effect.

The government's ruthless assault on the Tamil population in the North and East is a warning of what is in store for the working class as a whole whichever party wins the election next Tuesday. The United National Party prosecuted the war for more than a decade before losing to the PA in 1994. The PA came to power promising talks with the LTTE and peace but escalated the conflict to a new level of intensity. It now promises more of the same if it retains control of the parliament.



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