Sri Lankan general on high-profile trip to India

W.A. Sunil, K. Ratnayake
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In the midst of the ongoing political crisis in Sri Lanka, President Chandrika Kumaratunga dispatched the country's defence chief, General Lionel Balagalle, to India in early December to meet with the military top brass. The trip revealed the extent to which the upper echelons of the Sri Lankan military are playing an openly political role in the conflict between the president and the United National Front (UNF) government.

On November 4, the president used her extensive constitutional powers to seize control of three ministries—defence, interior and media—prorogue parliament for two weeks and move toward imposing a state of emergency. Since then, attempts to reach a compromise with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government have floundered.

The military openly sided with Kumaratunga. It was critical of Wickremesinghe for conceding too much during peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Before November 4, the top generals urged the president to take over the defence ministry on the grounds that the government was endangering national security by allowing the LTTE to build up its arms and bases, particularly in the east of the island.

During his trip to India on December 8-11, Balagalle acted as a virtual presidential envoy, discussing defence cooperation and sounding out New Delhi's support for Kumaratunga. He met Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes and the Indian defence chiefs. His itinerary included a tour of the Line of Control dividing the areas of Kashmir held by India and Pakistan. On his way back to Sri Lanka, Balagalle met with military commanders in southern India as well.

According to an Indian defence ministry spokesman, Fernandes and Balagalle discussed "mutual cooperation on various matters of interests and defence cooperation". Fernandes indicated that India was "ready to extend all necessary support for Sri Lanka's urgent defence needs". Balagalle used the opportunity to reiterate allegations that the LTTE was smuggling arms and preparing for war if the peace talks failed.

On returning to Sri Lanka, the defence chief revealed to the media that he had secured significant new military support from India. This included an agreement for the two navies to work together "to prevent all illegal activities including smuggling". Other agreements covered joint intelligence cooperation and the training of Sri Lanka commandos. India will also lease to Sri Lanka military helicopters to move troops between Colombo and the war-torn Jaffna peninsula and repair the runway at Palaly—the main Jaffna airbase—to enable its use by large Indian transports.

In addition, Balagalle sought to expedite a proposed Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with India. The deal was first mooted when Prime Minister Wickremesinghe met his Indian counterpart in October. Although details have not been divulged, the aim is to place Sri Lanka within India's strategic orbit and to facilitate closer military cooperation, including the sharing of facilities. India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Nirupam Sen, subsequently met with Kumaratunga to discuss the proposed DCA and then flew to New Delhi on December 14 for consultations there.

Balagalle's trip is significant from several standpoints. Firstly, Kumaratunga has used her formal control of the defence portfolio and the support of the military to effectively upstage the government in discussions on the DCA, as well as a significant boosting of military cooperation. These agreements are part of a broader economic and strategic realignment being undertaken by India, in close alliance with the US, to assert a dominant role in South Asia.

India and Sri Lanka are preparing to sign a "Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement". In October, Indian companies took out a lease on 99 huge oil

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tanks near the strategically located natural harbour of Trincomalee in eastern Sri Lanka. The Indian Oil Company has entered the Sri Lankan energy market, acquiring 100 petrol stations, while the Oil and Natural Gas Company (ONGC) is preparing to explore for offshore oil.

Secondly, the new defence arrangements with India directly impinge on the government's attempts to restart the stalled peace negotiations. All the announced measures strengthen the Sri Lankan military's hand against the LTTE. The LTTE leadership reacted sharply to the news of Indian military assistance. Within days of Balagalle's return, senior political leader Kausalyan warned against the deployment of foreign armies on Sri Lankan soil.

New Delhi has not publicly taken sides in the current political crisis in Colombo but has urged the president and prime minister to "cohabitate" to work out a settlement to end the war. In fact, India together with the US, applied pressure to Kumaratunga to force her to back away from imposing a state of emergency and taking further steps toward establishing a virtual military dictatorship. By bolstering the Sri Lankan military, India hopes to pressure the LTTE into accepting the parameters of the peace process as laid down by the major powers, particularly the US.

Sections of the Indian political establishment were critical of the LTTE's proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA), released on November 1. While the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government formally accepted the LTTE plan as the basis for resuming peace talks, a significant number of defence analysts and media commentators criticised the proposed ISGA as the establishment of a de facto separate state in the north and east of the island. Their comments reflect concerns that any concessions to the LTTE will further fuel separatist movements in parts of India—particularly in Kashmir and Tamil Nadu.

A recent seminar in Colombo entitled "Sri Lanka-India Strategic Dialogue" spelt out these views. Former Indian foreign secretary M. Rasgotra branded the LTTE's proposals as "not reasonable" and noted that "India has reiterated its firm commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka". Professor S.D. Muni from Jawaharlal University in New Delhi voiced similar criticisms of the Colombo government to those of Kumaratunga, saying that the LTTE had exploited the ceasefire "to make significant political as well as military-tactical gains" and declaring that Wickremesinghe's motto was "peace at any cost".

Thirdly, Balagalle's trip is another indication of the military's growing political involvement. An article in the *Sunday Times* by Sri Lankan defence analyst Iqbal Athas on December 21 noted the clear bias of the military chiefs, who no longer regard themselves as answerable to the elected government. "[Wickremesinghe] told his confidantes that since the subject of defence was taken over, there had been no formal official briefings for him or to any of his nominees. Nor are some intelligence assessments, previously forwarded, reaching him now."

Athas pointed out that Balagalle's statements to the media regarding the new defence arrangements were unusual for a military chief. "Ideally, the statement should have been the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence or even the Presidential Secretariat.... Naturally, a Foreign Ministry [under UNF control] input would also become necessary. That could have easily set out the facts bearing in mind all aspects including implications on national policy."

He concluded by saying: "It is time both President Kumaratunga and Premier Wickremesinghe realise that it would be extremely dangerous to allow this void in the defence sector to continue... If the generals, who have to get their military machine in order and bring their men to a higher level of preparedness, play the role of politicians, there is an even greater danger of bigger blunders."

Far from being a critic of the military, Athas has very close connections to the military and intelligence establishment in Colombo. He nevertheless felt compelled to end his column with a sharp warning about the dangers of military involvement in politics and to appeal to the president and government to end the current standoff. However, the intractability of the divisions in the ruling elites means that the military is likely to assume a greater political role.

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