

A split in the LTTE heightens danger of war in Sri Lanka

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A major split has erupted between the northern and eastern wings of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that has the potential to undermine the current ceasefire in Sri Lanka and plunge the country back to civil war. While at this stage no fighting has broken out, an extremely tense standoff continues between the two LTTE camps that could be exacerbated by any intervention by the Sri Lankan military.

On March 3, the LTTE's eastern province military commander, V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, wrote two letters effectively formalising the rift. The first to the LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran requested that the LTTE's eastern wing be allowed to "function independently" and called for a separate administration structure in the eastern Batticaloa-Ampara districts. The second to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the current ceasefire, called for a separate truce arrangement with the Colombo government.

The central LTTE leadership, based in the northern Wanni area, first attempted to downplay the crisis describing it as a "temporary" episode. But on March 6, political wing leader, S. Thamilselvan, announced that Muralitharan had been removed and replaced by his deputy, T. Ramesh, and that other Prabhakaran loyalists had been appointed to eastern regional posts. He declared that Muralitharan's move had been "instigated by some malicious elements" opposed to "Tamil liberation struggle" and that he had acted "traitorously to the Tamil people."

In an organisation that is well known for violence against its political opponents, Thamilselvan's statement amounted to a virtual death sentence. Muralitharan, however, has an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 guerrilla fighters—about one third of the LTTE's total military forces—under his control. Ramesh and the other new appointees, who fled to the Wanni after the split, have not been able to return to the east to take up their posts.

Far from backing down, Muralitharan had publicly aired his grievances and sought to consolidate political support in the Batticaloa and Ampara districts. He told Associated Press: "There is no question of reconciliation, everything was beyond reconciliation. In future we will have a full self-administration (in the east)." Speaking to Reuters on March 11, he repudiated the LTTE's longstanding claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people and declared that Prabhakaran had "no positive leadership qualities."

In the last two weeks, both sides have sought to tighten their grip. Hundreds of LTTE cadres suspected of harbouring loyalties to the rival camp have reportedly been rounded up and detained in the two areas. Last week Muralitharan's supporters organised demonstrations in several parts of the Batticaloa district at which effigies of Prabhakaran and the LTTE's intelligence chief Pottu Amman were burned. A number of university students and businessmen from the

north have either fled or been expelled from Batticaloa and Ampara.

According to the "Situation Report" in last weekend's *Sunday Times*, Muralitharan has sealed off the entry points into the areas under his control. "The flashpoint for a possible confrontation appears to be the border between the districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. In Trincomalee south, more than 1,500 cadres loyal to Mr Prabhakaran are said to have amassed themselves." The eastern commander had responded by sending another 300 fighters to Batticaloa north to reinforce checkpoints and build new bunkers.

Until now Muralitharan has been one of Prabhakaran's loyal lieutenants. The longstanding eastern commander sat alongside the LTTE leader during the organisation's first public press conference in the Wanni in April 2002. He was also part of the LTTE's delegation to peace talks with the Colombo government.

Among his grievances, Muralitharan told the media that he had been ordered to send 1,000 fighters to the Wanni and claimed that this move represented the preparation for a renewed war. He also accused Pottu Amman of being behind the murder of two United National Front (UNF) candidates for the country's April 2 election. He has provided no evidence for either claim, both of which appear to be aimed at gaining a sympathetic hearing from the UNF government. The Prabhakaran leadership has denied both accusations.

The nub of the dispute centres on complaints by the LTTE's eastern faction that it has been left out of the spoils of the "peace process." A pamphlet issued on March 4 by its political wing declared: "Thousands of LTTE cadres from the Batticaloa-Ampara districts participated in the fighting in the north...But their home district has continued to be neglected."

According to the pamphlet, none of the heads of the LTTE's 30 administrative bodies comes from the east. The cadres from the eastern district provide security for top northern functionaries who "move about in their luxury vehicles." Referring to the LTTE's proposed interim administration, it continued: "Our people doubt if they will get justice under the Interim Self Governing Authority, which the LTTE is to set up in the north and eastern province."

In an interview with the *Sunday Times* last weekend, Muralitharan accused the Wanni leadership of an "unequal distribution of resources." "Eastern soldiers are used as cannon fodder. Already we find it difficult to maintain our organisation in the east and to carry out development activities for the benefit of the people. We cannot understand what is happening to the money in the Wanni. They earn about 500 million rupees a month through 'taxation' alone," he said.

These sentiments clearly reflect growing resentment among broader layers of the population both in the east and the north towards the LTTE. Two years after the ceasefire was signed between the

government and the LTTE, the majority of people in the country's war zones—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike—are still living in poverty. Many homes and business have been destroyed. Others have not been able to return to their land and houses that have been commandeered by the Sri Lankan military as High Security Zones.

The so-called peace process has benefitted only a tiny layer of the LTTE leadership that has not hesitated to use threats and thuggery against any opposition. The killing of two UNF candidates is just the latest in a long line of political violence and assassinations. In 2002, local LTTE leaders on Kayts island off the northern Jaffna peninsula issued death threats against Socialist Equality Party members after they refused to hand over the funds of a fishermen's cooperative to the LTTE.

Far from representing any fundamental ideological break with the LTTE, the Muralitharan split is based on the same logic that underlies the LTTE's separatist program as a whole. In the 1970s, the LTTE diverted the legitimate anger of Tamil youth, workers and farmers over the discriminatory measures and economic hardships imposed by governments in Colombo into the communal demand for a separate capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam in the north and east.

Now Muralitharan is using the present and past grievances of "eastern Tamils" against "northern Tamils" to demand a separate administration in Batticaloa and Ampara and a seat of his own at any peace talks with the government. Neither he nor Prabhakaran have any solution to the social crisis confronting Tamil workers or the oppressed masses. Rather each represents the interests of different sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie who are seeking to maximise their own advantages in any peace deal with Colombo.

The split underscores the reactionary character of the "peace process" itself. Far from addressing any of the underlying political and social issues that produced the 20-year civil war, the peace talks are aimed at a powersharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites for the mutual exploitation of the working class. The various plans that have been tabled all seek to entrench communal divisions, thus paving the way for endless new tensions, divisions and conflict along ethnic, religious, and now regional lines.

At this stage, the eastern faction of the LTTE has received no official recognition either from Colombo or the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM). The Norwegian-led truce monitors have suspended their activities in areas under Muralitharan's control. The Sri Lankan defence ministry has rejected Muralitharan's call for a separate ceasefire agreement covering the Batticaloa and Ampara districts. He in turn has warned that his forces no longer regard themselves as bound by the previous truce.

The LTTE split has added another inflammatory factor to any already highly volatile political situation. President Chandrika Kumaratunga in alliance with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) ousted the elected UNF government last month, declaring that the peace process was undermining national security. In this political climate, the reaction in ruling circles in Colombo to Muralitharan's moves has been divided.

The LTTE rift clearly has the potential to disrupt the so-called process, which the UNF government has promoted on behalf of big business and the major powers to open up the island to global investment. Any step to open up separate talks with Muralitharan would provoke an angry response from the Wanni leadership, which has warned Colombo not to meddle. Yet if Muralitharan consolidates his control in the east, he cannot be simply ignored.

The LTTE infighting also throws another wild card into the April

elections. A grouping of Tamil parties known as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is standing in the poll as a virtual proxy for the LTTE. Previously, the TNA backed the UNF and its talks with the LTTE. What may emerge now, however, is a TNA divided along regional lines. The Muralitharan faction laid down the law to eastern TNA candidates this week declaring that they had to break with the Wanni leadership and pay more attention to problems in the east.

One faction of the ruling elite is playing down the divisions in the LTTE and hoping to salvage the peace process. The UNF has declared the LTTE split to be an internal matter to the organisation. For the time being, President Kumaratunga has also kept her distance from the dispute. The Defence Ministry, which is under her control, has put the armed forces on "full alert" in the eastern province to "prevent any clash" between the two groups.

An editorial in the *Sunday Times* on March 14 urged caution. "The best option may be to leave the warring factions to their own devices to sort [out] their differences. This need not be viewed as seeming indifference on the part of Colombo. But lending a helping hand to one against the other might needlessly precipitate a situation that is detrimental to the painful process towards peace in Sri Lanka."

Other sections of the Colombo elite insist that the LTTE split has to be exploited to maximum advantage. An editorial in the *Island* on March 5 entitled "The beginning of the end?" declared: "If there is a split in the LTTE, which has been holding this country in the grip of terror for over two decades, it will be in the interest of all communities to work towards its total destruction." It urged Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga to work together to seize what could be "an historic opportunity."

JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe has praised Muralitharan as a "reasonable voice" and declared that he had to be made "into the voice of the entire Tamil community." He denounced the UNF and "local and international conspiratorial forces" for trying to reconcile the two factions, saying that attempts to do so, "are sending danger signals to the people, the President in particular." His comments amount to an appeal, particularly to Kumaratunga, to support Muralitharan, including militarily, in an all-out effort to crush the Prabhakaran faction in the Wanni.

These statements clearly reflect the thinking of sections of the military and state apparatus. Any attempt to intervene in the split—either openly or covertly—carries the real danger of fighting not simply between the two LTTE factions, but a return to open civil war.



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