

Sri Lanka:

Tensions escalate in eastern province following murder of Tamil candidate

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Rajan Sathyamoorthy, the leading Tamil National Alliance (TNA) candidate in Sri Lanka's Batticaloa district, was gunned down last Tuesday, along with his brother-in-law. The cold-blooded murders are another indication of the violent confrontation brewing between the two competing factions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Sathyamoorthy was a well-known supporter of V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, who broke from the LTTE leadership in early March and set up his own command in the east of the island.

The killers entered Sathyamoorthy's house, pretending to be campaign supporters, then sprayed the interior with bullets, killing the two men on the spot and seriously wounding another. Police reported that Sathyamoorthy had received repeated death threats but said he had refused an offer of protection. The deaths brought the number of election-related murders in the campaign for yesterday's general election to four.

Attempts were made to kill two other prominent eastern Tamils who support Karuna and have spoken out against the LTTE leadership. They were V. Thiruchelvam, a faculty head at Eastern University, and Ratnam Maunagurusamy, the top government official in the eastern province. Both survived, but had to undergo intensive medical care.

The LTTE leadership based in the northern Wanni region has denied any responsibility for killing Sathyamoorthy. Just before the murder, however, the LTTE issued what amounted to a death sentence on Karuna and anyone supporting him. "To safeguard our nation and our people, it has been decided to get rid of Karuna from our soil... Anybody who opposes disciplinary action against Karuna, will be considered

as a traitor to the Tamil national cause," it declared.

The LTTE is notorious for the repression of any dissent in its own ranks as well as for the intimidation and murder of its political opponents. The Wanni leadership had every reason to target Sathyamoorthy. He led what amounted to a breakaway faction of the TNA in the East, which backed Karuna and no longer recognised the LTTE's claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people.

The TNA is an alliance of Tamil parties formed in 2001 as a virtual parliamentary proxy for the LTTE. The LTTE was hoping that the TNA would hold the balance of power in the next parliament and thus create favourable conditions for any renewed peace talks. With the Karuna split and the fracturing of the TNA, those plans are in tatters.

Two weeks before Sathyamoorthy's murder, one of Karuna's deputies called a meeting of all TNA candidates in the East. He instructed them to refrain from campaigning for the TNA manifesto and to concentrate instead on the problems of the eastern region. The Karuna faction has no principled disagreement with the Wanni leadership, but has criticised it for taking the lion's share of the organisation's money and administrative positions, and for neglecting the East.

According to a report of the meeting in the *Daily Mirror*, only one TNA candidate, Joseph Pararajasingham, opposed Karuna. Sathyamoorthy reportedly told the gathering that arrangements were being made, in consultation with senior lawyers in Colombo, for all TNA MPs elected from Batticaloa and Amparai to function as an independent parliamentary group under Karuna's direction. A week later, the head

of the LTTE's political division, S.T. Tamilselvan, publicly branded Sathyamoorthy a traitor during a TV interview.

Sathyamoorthy's own record is indicative of the class orientation of the LTTE. He was a leading businessman and president of the Batticaloa Traders Association. Until the ceasefire between the government and the LTTE was signed in February 2002, he had been a longstanding member of the rightwing United National Party (UNP), contesting the Batticaloa district for the party in 1994. Over the past two years, he was a prominent organiser for the LTTE, working closely with Karuna.

In the aftermath of yesterday's election, the conflict between the two LTTE factions is likely to escalate. While the Wanni leadership has denounced Karuna as a traitor and dismissed his influence as insignificant, the eastern group has an estimated 6,000 well-armed fighters at its disposal, many of whom are battle-hardened. One of Karuna's complaints has been that the "eastern" cadres have borne a large share of the fighting against the Sri Lankan army but received few of the privileges.

Karuna has exploited the growing resentment and dissatisfaction with the LTTE's anti-democratic methods and its failure to resolve any of the pressing social problems confronting Tamils. Incapable of offering any progressive solution, however, the eastern faction blames the "northerners" and appeals to longstanding grievances over the dominance of Tamils from the northern town of Jaffna.

Karuna has gained some support among layers of Tamil business people, academics and government officials in the East as well as young people. There have been several protests and demonstrations in the East against the Wanni leadership. Following the attempt on the life of Thiruchelvam on March 23, some 3,000 protestors gathered in Vantharamoolai and burnt an effigy of LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran.

If he consolidates his grip in the Batticaloa and Ampara districts, Karuna will further undermine Prabhakaran's claim to be the "sole representative" of Tamils, which is the basis for the LTTE's monopoly of Tamil seats in the peace talks with the government. At present, neither President Chandrika Kumaratunga's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) nor the rival United National Front (UNF) has indicated any support

for Karuna's demand for a separate ceasefire. The Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) has withdrawn its monitors from the areas under his control.

But the situation could rapidly change in the parliamentary horse-trading that is likely to follow yesterday's election. Both the UPFA and UNF will be looking to make deals to establish a parliamentary majority. If the next government openly supports one or other LTTE faction, it is likely to heighten tensions and lead to fighting.

According to the "Situation Report" in the *Sunday Times*, more than 1,000 fighters from the two factions are facing off against each other on opposite banks of the Verugal river, north of Batticaloa and south of Trincomalee. The LTTE has been attempting to strengthen its position by moving "northern" fighters into the area and deploying several vessels to seal off Verugal Bay.

Iqbal Athas, who writes the "Situation Report," has close ties to Sri Lankan military and intelligence circles. He reported that the army and navy have both reinforced their forces in the region. According to Athas, the military top brass has warned the SLMM that "the outbreak of clashes [between the LTTE factions] may force the security forces to get entangled". While Athas is silent on the matter, there are undoubtedly elements of the military who want to seize the opportunity of a divided LTTE to make military gains.

The slaying of Sathyamoorthy is just one symptom of a highly combustible situation that threatens to plunge the country back into the disastrous civil war that has already claimed the lives of at least 60,000 people.



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