

Sri Lanka:

LTTE launches offensive to suppress dissident eastern faction

Wije Dias
13 April 2004

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leadership based in the northern Wanni area of Sri Lanka launched a military offensive in the early hours of last Friday to suppress a dissident faction led by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, in the East of the island. Fierce fighting, involving hundreds of soldiers armed with mortars and artillery, left heavy casualties on both sides.

The exact number of dead and wounded is unknown. The bodies of 10 fighters from the Karuna faction were reportedly brought to the eastern city of Batticaloa. Staff at the Valachchinai hospital told the media that 22 injured were admitted, several of them in a serious condition. Based on military sources, the Situation Report in last weekend's *Sunday Times* indicated that casualties were higher. A senior army official reported more than 250 dead or wounded on both sides and at least 15 civilian deaths.

The main civil administrator in the Batticaloa district, C. Punyamoorthy, estimated that 11,000 people fled their homes on Friday. "About 4,000 have moved to school buildings, but others have gone to safer areas to live with their friends or relatives. We are making arrangements to provide them with rations for three days," he said.

While details are sketchy, it appears that rebel forces led by Karuna have rapidly collapsed. The two sides have been facing off on opposite banks of the Verugal River, north of Batticaloa, since Karuna broke away in early March with an estimated 6,000 of the LTTE's 15,000 fighters. Karuna's main grievance was that "eastern" LTTE fighters had borne the brunt of the fighting against the Sri Lankan army, but had been neglected since the ceasefire in February 2002.

Last Friday, units loyal to the northern leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran crossed the river and, following the initial clashes, moved rapidly south, securing a number of towns along the coast. Sporadic fighting continued over the weekend. On Sunday, however, Karuna reportedly told more than 400 fighters at his main base at Meenakam to abandon the fighting and return to their homes.

Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim told Associated Press: "According to information we have received, Karuna seems to

have given up. We are still uncertain about Karuna's destiny." Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Cyril Herath indicated that the government would be prepared to consider a request for sanctuary, but said that the military had not heard from him. He denied rumours that the military had sent a helicopter to rescue the rebel LTTE leader.

There is no doubt that the LTTE leadership will rapidly stamp out any opposition in the East to its authority. After Karuna broke away last month, the Prabhakaran leadership vowed "to get rid of Karuna from our soil" and branded anyone who supported him as "a traitor to the Tamil national cause." On March 30, gunmen shot dead Rajan Sathyamoorthy, a leading Tamil National Alliance (TNA) candidate in the Batticaloa district, who backed Karuna. Assassination attempts were also made against other prominent Karuna supporters.

Karuna had undermined the LTTE's claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people, seeking a separate ceasefire with the Colombo government. Sathyamoorthy threatened to split the TNA, a coalition of Tamil parties, that acted as a virtual political proxy for the LTTE in the April 2 elections. By suppressing the Karuna faction, the LTTE leadership has ensured that it will have a monopoly in any peace talks with the newly installed United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government.

The split in the LTTE has intersected with a deep-going political crisis in Colombo, that culminated in President Chandrika Kumaratunga's decision to sack the United National Front (UNF) government in February. Backed by the military and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Kumaratunga attacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe for conceding too much to the LTTE in peace talks.

In the leadup to the April 2 election, the president and the government both stood back from the LTTE conflict, formally at least. Not wishing to alienate the Prabhakaran leadership, neither Kumaratunga nor Wickremesinghe gave any public support to Karuna's call for recognition and a separate ceasefire. There is no doubt, however, that sections of the political establishment, particularly among the military top brass, were seeking to use the conflict to weaken the LTTE.

An editorial in the *Island* newspaper on Saturday took a backhanded way, to the sentiment among sections of the ruling elite when it declared: “A politically savvy government could use this opportunity of the hitherto monolithic terror organisation splitting up to end this canker of terrorism [the LTTE] but regrettably the chances are that government interference could only mess it all up. Given the record of our armed forces of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory and kicking into our own goal, it’s best that the government keeps out of this Battle of the Warlords.”

There are a number of indications that Kumaratunga and the military were, at least tentatively, attempting to manipulate the crisis in the LTTE’s ranks for their own political and military ends. Far from keeping the two sides apart, the military appears to have permitted the Prabhakaran faction to build up its land and sea forces in areas adjacent to those controlled by Karuna. Such military movements are strictly controlled under the terms of the February 2002 ceasefire agreement.

In one reported instance, a total of 86 northern fighters crossed the Omanthai military checkpoint in groups of two and three, to be later transported to the east in two buses. The military stopped the vehicles but, rather than returning them to the Wannai, handed over the fighters to the LTTE leadership in the Trincomalee district. As this is adjacent to the Batticaloa district held by Karuna, the fighters could then be moved to the frontline.

In the past, the military has seized on alleged breaches of the ceasefire to protest to the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM). Over the last month, however, there has been a marked silence. After a meeting on Saturday between Kumaratunga and the three top military chiefs, the defence ministry issued a statement declaring: “It is intended to inform the Norwegian facilitators to convey to the LTTE that this [fighting] is a violation of the ceasefire agreement and the government expects to take up this issue with the LTTE leadership.”

At the same time as allowing Prabhakaran’s forces into the east, Kumaratunga and the military appear to have made political overtures to the Karuna faction. The UPFA—a coalition between Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the JVP and several smaller parties—won the most seats at the April 2 election, but is still eight seats short of a parliamentary majority. The support of four or five TNA MPs thought to be loyal to Karuna would have closed the gap.

Karuna was clearly trying to use the TNA MPs as a bargaining chip. In an interview in the *Island* last week, he praised Kumaratunga’s appointment of Mahinda Rajapakse as the new prime minister, saying “he is a good person” with “long experience as a politician.” At the same time, Karuna endorsed moves by Kumaratunga and Rajapakse to involve India in peace talks, declaring that there could not be “any permanent solution... without the intervention and inclusion of India.”

referred, in *Significantly Island* Karunathat tolde that one of the LTTE cadres, Neelan, accused of being involved in the 1991 assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. New Delhi has repeatedly demanded the trial of those responsible for the killing. While Karuna did not say if he would hand over Neelan to Indian authorities, he did not rule it out, saying a decision was yet to be made.

At Karuna’s request, the Sri Lankan military provided the TNA MPs from Batticaloa with a security escort to Colombo to participate in a meeting of the TNA on Wednesday. The expectation was that the MPs would break from the Wannai-dominated group and form their own separate parliamentary faction. But once outside Karuna’s territory, the MPs lined up with the rest of the TNA parliamentarians in affirming that the LTTE was the “sole representative” of the Tamil people.

After the outcome of the meeting became known, the military demanded that the eastern MPs, against their protests, return to Batticaloa. According to an account in the *Sunday Leader*, the MPs made a series of frantic telephone calls to military officials, including one to the military chief General Lionel Balagalle and another to Defence Secretary Cyril Herath, insisting they wanted to stay in Colombo. In an extraordinary political intervention, the army pressured the elected MPs into returning, under escort, to the East.

The Prabhakaran leadership has declared from the outset that it regards the split with Karuna as an “internal matter” and warned against outside interference. Kumaratunga’s decision to open up a line of communication with Karuna via the military will only inflame what was already a tense situation. The decision to send the eastern MPs back under military escort was an openly partisan move that may well have prompted the LTTE leadership to finally act to crush Karuna.

It appears that Kumaratunga was deliberately allowing a military buildup in the East, and stoking tensions, in the hope that a military confrontation between the two factions would seriously weaken the LTTE. Whatever her exact motives, the president’s manoeuvring indicates, at the very least, a reckless indifference to the danger of renewed civil war, with all its devastating consequences for ordinary working people.



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