

Continued killings in eastern Sri Lanka threaten to undermine ceasefire

K. Ratnayake
1 June 2004

A spate of killings in the Batticaloa district of eastern Sri Lanka over the past month is threatening the ceasefire signed between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in February 2002. While the murders have been attributed in the Colombo press to an ongoing factional struggle in the LTTE, the LTTE leadership has accused the security forces of being involved.

At this stage, the conflict remains confined largely to the east and the number of casualties is relatively low. But the continuing killings may undermine attempts by President Chandrika Kumaratunga to restart negotiations with the LTTE and could lead to a renewal of the country's disastrous civil war.

The LTTE factional dispute broke out in March when the LTTE's military commander in the Batticaloa-Ampara area, V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, broke away and attempted to set up his own command. No fundamental political differences were involved. The Karuna faction complained bitterly that while fighters from the east had borne the brunt of the fighting, the northern LTTE leadership based in the Wanni had been reaping the material benefits of the ceasefire.

In mid-April, the LTTE launched an offensive against Karuna's fighters, who were estimated to number some 6,000. The eastern rebellion rapidly collapsed and Karuna ordered most of his units to disperse. A group of the fighters reportedly went underground with Karuna, who continues to issue statements of defiance and warnings to his political opponents.

A number of northern LTTE cadre have been killed as the Wanni leadership has attempted to reestablish its authority in the eastern districts and to reopen political offices, police stations and military camps previously run by Karuna. According to an article in the *Daily Mirror* last Wednesday, some 70 percent of the LTTE's political offices in the Batticaloa district remain unoccupied. The bulk of its military and administrative organisation in the area collapsed after the defection of the Karuna faction.

The first murders took place in late April when seven

northern LTTE members—three sentries and four disabled fighters—were shot dead near Batticaloa. A few days later, three more LTTE cadres were killed, including one who died from a landmine blast on May 1 at Pondukalchchenai. Another two were shot dead on May 6 at Thanmunai, in Batticaloa district.

The LTTE accused the Sri Lankan army for helping “a paramilitary group” to carry out these attacks and lodged an official complaint with the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM)—the Norwegian-led group responsible for supervising the ceasefire. On May 8, Thamichelvan, leader of the LTTE's political wing, declared that “the killers have the assistance of the SLA [Sri Lankan army]” and warned “the entire peace process and the cease fire agreement are being placed at heavy risk”.

On the basis of the information available to date, it is not clear whether the Sri Lankan military, or a section of it, has been involved, directly or indirectly, in the murders. But at the time of the Karuna split, sections of the Colombo media were urging the government to take advantage of the situation. The LTTE pointed out that the killings have taken place close to army checkpoints, implying that the Sri Lankan military had to be complicit in the attacks.

On May 9, for the first time since the ceasefire agreement was signed, a government soldier, Lance Corporal Wasantha Colombage, was killed in broad daylight while travelling on a bus in civilian clothes to Batticaloa town. Colombage was no ordinary corporal but was attached to the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI), which is notorious for its covert operations, including assassinations, against the LTTE. While the LTTE denied any involvement, the murder could well have been designed to send a message to the military to desist from giving support to the Karuna group.

Two days later on May 11, the SLMM organised a meeting in the Batticaloa district between the army's area commander Brigadier General V. Wijegoonawardena and the LTTE's new Batticaloa-Amparai military chief T. Ramesh to defuse the issue. According to the *Island* newspaper's report, Wijegoonawardena offered the LTTE

“an assurance” that it would not take advantage of the factional conflict. A joint communiqué declared that both sides had agreed to develop the means to prevent serious crimes and to apprehend anyone involved in such crimes.

A week later, however, the killings in Batticaloa district started again. On May 19, police intelligence officer Dassanayaka was killed. Three days later an LTTE member, Markandu Punithalingam, was murdered at Aalankulam. On May 24, the head of economics department at Batticaloa University, Kumaravel Thambiah, was assassinated. Thambiah was a supporter of the Wannu leadership, which condemned the murder, and several prominent LTTE leaders attended his funeral. No one has been arrested in any of these cases.

The continued killings are an ominous sign. It is possible that the murders are simply the work of the LTTE factions but the involvement of the Sri Lankan military cannot be ruled out. Sections of the military hierarchy are no doubt incensed that Kumaratunga has, since the April 2 election, rapidly abandoned her criticisms of the peace process under the previous United National Front (UNF) government and is seeking to restart negotiations. Encouraging conflict in the east could be a means of undermining any talks.

Significantly, Kumaratunga took the unusual step on May 24 of appointing the army’s chief-of-staff, Major General S.H.S. Kottegoda, as overall operational commander (OOC) in the eastern district. The official announcement declared that Kottegoda would take steps to “improve the security situation” in the eastern province.

To appoint a high-ranking officer to an “operational” command under conditions of a ceasefire could be interpreted as a provocative step toward war. But it appears that Kottegoda has been assigned to rein in elements of the military intent on disrupting the peace process.

An article in the *Sunday Times* last weekend noted that the major general had toured defence establishments in the East. “Speaking to senior officers, including those from the police, he made clear his task was to ensure that all measures to prevent a breakdown of the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) were in place. He said those in the district had a responsibility to adhere to the CFA and it was the task of the senior officers to ensure that it was enforced.”

The report further explained that Kottegoda “had gone to the East armed with full powers to deal with any officers or men found negligent, attempting to scuttle the ceasefire or violate directives”. Kottegoda’s tour is a tacit admission that, at the very least, there are elements in the military’s officer corps who are disgruntled with the return to peace talks with the LTTE and view the conflict in the Batticaloa district as a means for subverting them.

While still relatively confined, the rather murky conflict in

the East highlights the precarious political situation in the country as a whole. After her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) lost office in 2001, Kumaratunga relied on the military and Sinhala chauvinist organisations such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) as she berated the UNF government for making impermissible concessions to the LTTE.

Now that the SLFP is back in office, Kumaratunga has abruptly changed course. But her turn to talks with the LTTE is clearly triggering opposition from her former allies in the military and also the JVP, which is now part of the ruling coalition. Whoever carried them out, the killings in the Batticaloa district will inevitably be exploited to whip up a climate of fear and communalism, which in turn carries the real danger of a slide back to war.

The latest murder took place yesterday: a veteran Tamil journalist, Iyadurai Nadesan, who was sympathetic to the northern LTTE leadership, was shot dead in broad daylight in the centre of Batticaloa town.

See Also:

Attempts to restart Sri Lankan peace talks heighten political instability

[20 May 2000]

Sri Lankan president's call for peace talks fuels tensions in government ranks

[4 May 2004]

New Sri Lankan parliament descends into chaos

[24 April 2004]

Sri Lankan election produces a hung parliament and further political instability

[5 April 2004]



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact