

Sri Lankan military's intrigues with LTTE rebel faction threatens ceasefire

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The Sri Lankan ceasefire agreement is increasingly under threat following revelations that the army provided assistance to a breakaway faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) headed by its former eastern commander, V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna. As the conflict between the two factions continues in the east, the LTTE has warned of a return to war if the military's collusion with Karuna persists.

The Karuna faction broke away from the LTTE in March, accusing the northern Wanni-based leadership of monopolising the top posts and the benefits of the ceasefire signed in February 2002. While the LTTE rapidly retook control of the Batticaloa-Ampara region of the island in mid-April, a series of murders have since taken place in the area under murky and unexplained circumstances.

At least 21 LTTE members, including seven loyal to Karuna, have been killed since late April. In addition, six civilians have been shot dead in government-held areas, as well as several police and army intelligence personnel and their informants. The Wanni leadership has accused Karuna's fighters of murdering its cadre with the assistance of the Sri Lankan army, including its intelligence wing—allegations that the military and defence ministry have repeatedly denied.

On June 21, however, Karuna loyalist Nilavini, formerly head of the LTTE's women's military wing in the east, appeared at a press conference in the Wanni town of Kilinochchi. Nilavini explained that she, Karuna and three other top women military cadre were brought to Colombo by an opposition United National Front (UNF) parliamentarian Ali Zahir Moulana Seyed.

After initially being housed at the JAIC Hilton, one of the city's five-star hotels, they were shifted to military safe houses. According to Nilavini, a high-ranking army intelligence official visited Karuna regularly. When Karuna told the women on June 13 that he was leaving the country, they contacted a relative, travelled to the Wanni and rejoined the LTTE.

Aspects of the story are still unclear. But Ali Moulana has since admitted bringing the group to Colombo and, amid the furor that followed, resigned as an MP. Despite denials from the military, there is mounting evidence that the army held Karuna and the women in "protective custody".

After Nilavini's press conference, Defence Secretary Cyril Herath, speaking on the BBC Sinhala service, "categorically denied the allegations". But he was soon contradicted by a minister in the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government. At a cabinet press briefing on June 24, Information Minister Mangala Samaraweera admitted that a section of the military had been supporting the Karuna faction, but without the government's approval.

According to a BBC report, Samaraweera declared: "Obviously

there have been military personnel involved. I mean we cannot deny [it] but [it was] not with the knowledge or connivance of the government." He explained that the government was investigating the affair and sought to divert attention by accusing the UNF leader Ranil Wickremesinghe of "duplicity" in helping Karuna and attempting to disrupt the peace process. Wickremesinghe has denied any involvement.

Samaraweera issued a further statement on the same day "correcting" media reports. He emphasised that "he did not admit to the authorised involvement of the Sri Lankan military in the Karuna issue as alleged". But neither did he deny that sections of the military were involved. Deputy Defence Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake attempted to shut the door on the issue by declaring that the "army has no connection at all in helping Karuna to escape or thereafter". He blamed "false propaganda" from "those who are against the government".

On June 27, however, the *Sunday Times* defence correspondent Iqbal Athas, who has close connections with the military establishment, stated in his regular column: "The *Sunday Times* is able to reveal today that the army did provide 'protective custody' to 'Col' Karuna and his party. The fact that such protection was given to him and cadres was brought to the attention of the authorities concerned, investigations by the *Sunday Times* revealed. They were fully aware."

The protestations of innocence by the government and the military have been further exposed by revelations that a cabinet minister, Douglas Devandanda, leader of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), has been in contact with Karuna. Devandanda has admitted that he not only spoke with the renegade LTTE leader but advised him on how to go about forming a political party. The EPDP is a Tamil party and militia, notorious for its close collaboration with the army against the LTTE in the north of the island.

The exact nature of the military's dealings with Karuna remain unclear, but is simply not credible that the military top brass knew nothing about what was going on. At the very least, the military, or sections of it, was giving "protective custody" to Karuna, while his fighters were carrying out attacks on the cadre and supporters of the Wanni-based LTTE leadership.

The obvious impact of the military's actions was to undermine the present ceasefire and the government's attempts to restart negotiations with the LTTE. The LTTE leadership clearly could not indefinitely tolerate a situation in which the army was colluding with a rebel faction that challenged its claims to be "the sole representative" of the Tamil people and that was killing its fighters and officials.

Obviously concerned at the potential for the "Karuna affair" to

plunge Sri Lanka back to war, Norwegian special envoy, Erick Solheim, arrived back on the island last week for a four-day visit. President Chandrika Kumaratunga called on Norway to resume its role as mediator in the so-called peace process in late April, after her UPFA defeated the UNF in general elections on April 2.

Solheim met with LTTE political-wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan on June 30 but declared there had been no breakthrough in establishing the basis for new peace talks. In his statement to the media, Thamilselvan bluntly explained why, declaring: "If the Sri Lankan president and government are serious about the ceasefire agreement and peace talks they should stop sheltering Karuna and backing the murder and mayhem in which some of the henchmen are indulging in Batticaloa... If this situation is allowed to continue it will jeopardise the ceasefire and the entire peace process."

Commentator Iqbal Athas noted in the *Sunday Times* last weekend that the LTTE response was quite cautious. The LTTE did not demand the handover of Karuna. "The main focus was the LTTE's complaint about an alleged Army collusion with the Karuna faction to carry out attacks. This, the LTTE had pointed [out], had caused difficulties for them in restoring normalcy in areas under their control in the Batticaloa district," he wrote.

While Solheim was trying to reconcile the government and the LTTE, the US warned both sides not to jeopardise the peace process. US Ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead called on the LTTE and military to talk to each other and cautioned them "not to allow the situation in the east to go out of control". Washington is pushing for an end to the country's 20-year civil war, which threatens to cut across its growing economic and strategic interests in the South Asia region.

After talks with Solheim on July 1, Kumaratunga issued a carefully-worded statement rejecting "publicly aired allegations by the LTTE that the government had authorised the Sri Lankan military activities in the Eastern Province in support of the Karuna faction". The statement was a transparent exercise in damage control, which denied any government involvement, but did not categorically rule out that military may have been collaborating with Karuna.

At present, Kumaratunga's exact role in the events is not clear. But, as commander-in-chief and defence minister, it is virtually impossible that she knew nothing about what was taking place. In fact, in late May, Kumaratunga took the unusual step of appointing the army's chief-of-staff, Lieutenant General S.H.S. Kottegoda as overall operational commander in the eastern district to "improve the security situation". Kottegoda promptly toured the military establishments in the region and, by all accounts, laid down the law to those in command to adhere strictly to the ceasefire agreement.

Significantly Kottegoda took over as army commander last week following the retirement of Lieutenant General L.P. Balagalle from the post. In what was interpreted as a deliberate snub to Balagalle by the Colombo press, Kumaratunga's statement on July 1 declared that "under the command of Lt. Gen. Shantha Kottegoda, the Sri Lankan Army will continue to abide by ceasefire agreement". It was more than a slip of the pen. Kumaratunga clearly knew or suspected that Balagalle, former head of military intelligence and the man responsible in the late 1980s for recruiting the LTTE's armed rivals to fight on the army's side, had been intriguing in the East.

In his farewell speech on June 30, Balagalle made a point of completely denying the LTTE "allegations". But when the Karuna faction broke away in March, he was keen to use the split in the LTTE to weaken the organisation. In an interview on the Indian-based *rediff.com* website on April 5, he commented: "[I]f the division

continues, it has weakened them, there is no doubt about it. If Karuna continues to oppose Prabhakaran [the LTTE leader], it will certainly be a problem for them. They will certainly be a weakened force."

What has been revealed are sharp divisions in the military, not simply over the Karuna faction but the government's attempts to restart the peace process. It is a situation that Kumaratunga has played a key role in creating.

Before the April 2 elections, the president collaborated closely with the military, Balagalle in particular, and Sinhala extremist parties, such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), to undermine the ceasefire signed in 2002 by the previous UNF government. She repeatedly accused former Prime Minister Wickremesinghe of compromising national security and making impermissible concessions to the LTTE in the course of peace talks.

Last November, Kumaratunga took the first steps in what amounted to a constitutional coup. With the backing of the military and the JVP, she used her presidential powers to take over three key ministries, including defence, and moved to impose a state of emergency. She only pulled back under pressure from Washington and New Delhi. After three months of a tense political standoff, Kumaratunga finally dismissed the elected government in February and called fresh elections on April 2.

The UPFA—a coalition between Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the JVP and several smaller parties—won more seats than the UNF, but not a majority in parliament. In the aftermath of the election, Kumaratunga immediately came under pressure from business and the major powers to restart peace talks with the LTTE. The country's donors made clear that \$4.5 billion in financial assistance would be forthcoming only if the ceasefire and the peace process continued.

Kumaratunga made an abrupt about-face and called in the Norwegian mediators. In doing so, she has alienated her former allies in the military and the Sinhala chauvinist groups. The JVP remains in the government but has threatened serious consequences if the government begins negotiations on the basis of the LTTE's proposals for an interim administration in the North and East. The military's intrigues with Karuna have revealed that a section of the army is working to sabotage the ceasefire.

What the conspiracies and manoeuvres around the Karuna affair have again demonstrated is the complete inability of any section of the Sri Lankan ruling elite to end the country's disastrous civil war on a progressive basis to meet the needs and aspirations of the masses.

See Also:

Sri Lankan president resorts to another extra-constitutional measure [19 June 2004]

Sri Lankan president's call for peace talks fuels tensions in government ranks [4 May 2004]



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