Suicide bomb blast in Sri Lanka threatens ceasefire

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A suicide bomb attack in the heart of the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo on Wednesday has further undermined the country's fragile ceasefire. The target of the attack was almost certainly Douglas Devananda, minister for agriculture, marketing development and Hindu affairs in the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government.

According to police accounts, a Tamil woman came to the government offices on Wednesday—the official day for members of the public to meet the minister—and asked to speak to Devananda. Security officials became suspicious and asked the bomber to undergo a full body search. When she refused she was taken to the nearby Kollupitiya police station. Again she refused to undergo a search and then detonated the explosives, killing herself and four police instantly. At least 12 others were injured.

The attack was the first suicide bomb attack in Colombo since October 2001 and constitutes a serious breach of the ceasefire signed between the previous United National Front (UNF) government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in February 2002. The LTTE has previously carried out suicide bombings, even though it has not publicly claimed responsibility for particular attacks.

In this case, the LTTE issued a formal statement on Thursday "strongly condemning " the attack. It denied any involvement and claimed the bombing "to be one of the operations of some elements, who are working to disrupt the peace efforts".

The statement implied that an LTTE breakaway faction headed by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, was responsible and accused the government and military of collusion. "We suspect that it is the granting of refuge to these groups and permission given to them to act freely in Colombo that has paved the way for yesterday's attack in Colombo," it declared.

It is highly improbable, however, that the Karuna faction was involved. Far from being a political enemy of Karuna, Devananda has recently been engaged in discussions with the rebel leader over the transformation of his faction into a political party. The minister is leader of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which has fought alongside the army against the LTTE.

It is far more likely that the LTTE instigated the suicide bombing as a blunt warning to the government and the military to deal with the Karuna faction and end the killing of its cadre in the East.

In March, Karuna, who was the LTTE's eastern military commander, broke from the northern LTTE leadership based in the Wanni, accusing it of monopolising the benefits of the ceasefire. While the LTTE took back control of the Batticaloa-Ampara region in mid-April, the conflict between the two factions has continued, with a string of murders and assassinations in the last two months.

The LTTE has accused the Sri Lankan military of using the Karuna faction to undermine its position in the East and to kill its fighters and officials. The army and the government denied the allegations, but a series of revelations over the past fortnight all point to the fact that Karuna did come to Colombo and was given protection in a military intelligence safe house.

So damning were the disclosures that President Chandrika Kumaratunga was compelled to issue a statement through her presidential secretariat denying the government had authorised the military's activities in the eastern province. She did not, however, contradict the LTTE's claim that the military, or a section of it, had been involved in assisting the Karuna faction.

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Shortly after Kumaratunga's statement, two more serious attacks took place in Batticaloa town. On Monday, the LTTE's Batticaloa political leader Senathy and his companion were shot and wounded. In a separate incident on the same day, another LTTE cadre known as Wasu was shot dead and his colleague wounded. Both attacks occurred in army-controlled areas.

In response, the LTTE issued an angry statement, declaring: "The killings clearly indicate that security forces are intent on undermining the memorandum of understanding (ceasefire agreement) and are creating conditions for war." In all likelihood, the suicide bomber directed at Karuna's closest political collaborator in Colombo was to underscore the warning in the strongest possible terms.

Kumaratunga has downplayed the bombing. Speaking on the state-controlled Independent Television Network, she listed her government's achievements since winning the April 2 election and then observed: "[T]he peace process falls into a much broader category to be derailed by a mere incident of this nature (bomb blast)."

The response of the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a key partner in the UPFA government, was also very muted. JVP spokesman Wimal Weerawansa assured the media that the attack would not undermine the government's efforts to restart peace talks with the LTTE. It was aimed at an individual, he said, and there was no reason for the peace process to be affected.

While the government's reaction has been cautious, the political establishment in Colombo is well aware that the country is teetering on the brink of a return to war. The LTTE cannot indefinitely permit its fighters and officials to be assassinated by the Karuna faction. Whether or not Kumaratunga was personally involved in the military's intrigues in the East, she is directly responsible for creating the current crisis.

Prior to the April 2 election, Kumaratunga mounted a protracted campaign against the so-called peace process. Along with the JVP and other Sinhala extremist groups, she criticised the previous UNF government for undermining national security and for making impermissible concessions to the LTTE. She declared the ceasefire to be illegal and cooperated with the military to undermine the peace talks.

After the elections, the UPFA government rapidly came under pressure from the major powers and big business to maintain the ceasefire and restart talks. Any return to war would have an immediate and drastic impact on the island's economy and the government's already overstretched finances. Kumaratunga made a rapid about face and called on Norway to resume its role as mediator in peace talks.

However, Kumaratunga's attacks on the UNF have had a definite political impact. Her denunciations of the peace talks have only encouraged and emboldened layers in the military and various Sinhala extremist groups that regard any negotiated settlement with the LTTE as tantamount to treason. It is their intriguing in the East that has provoked the latest bombing in Colombo and which now threatens to plunge the country back to war.

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