

Sri Lankan president puts military in charge of relief operations

Wije Dias

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In an extraordinary move on January 3, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga placed all relief efforts on the island under the control of the armed forces. The following day, in a decision that received no publicity, she imposed a state of emergency in the affected areas, providing the military with extensive powers.

Admiral Daya Sandagiri, a close confidante of the president, who was recently appointed Chief of Defence Staff, has been installed as overall commander of relief operations. In turn, he has appointed rear admirals, air commodores, major generals, brigadiers and colonels as military coordinators in each of the districts hit by the December 26 tsunami.

As a result, 12 of the country's 22 districts are effectively under military command. To be in charge of relief work in these areas means to command most aspects of local and district administration because the devastation is so great that this is the only activity. Everything from rebuilding and the restoration of services and transport links to the flow of emergency supplies and the police operations is being supervised by what amount to military governors.

Just prior to announcing her decision, Kumaratunga held an all-party conference to discuss the tsunami disaster. But she gave no hint to the assembled politicians of what she was planning. With the exception of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which acts as a mouthpiece for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), none of the parties has objected. The right-wing opposition United National Front has declared its full support to the president "to re-build the nation".

There is no reason why ordinary people should regard the military as benefactors. In the north and east of the island, the military has been engaged in a 20-year civil war aimed at suppressing the democratic rights of the Tamil minority. Until a ceasefire was signed with the LTTE in 2002, Tamils were routinely harassed by security forces and thousands were detained without trial as "LTTE suspects", and in some cases tortured.

In the south of the island, the military violently put down an uprising by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the late 1980s. The operation, in which an estimated 100,000 rural Sinhala youth were slaughtered by the army and associated death squads, was aimed not only at the JVP, but against

broader discontent over unemployment and poverty.

Already several voluntary aid organisations have protested against the decision to place the military in charge. In response, Kumaratunga announced that military officials would only be coordinating the distribution of aid to refugee camps. In reality, however, top officers will continue to have a powerful role over the civilian administration at the provincial and district levels.

The government and the media have attempted to justify the military's takeover of relief operations as necessary to ensure "security". A spate of exaggerated reports has appeared in the Colombo press highlighting crimes against tsunami victims. However, even though refugee camps for persons displaced by the war have existed for more than 20 years, this is the first time the military has taken over their control.

Iqbal Athas, defence analyst for the *Sunday Times*, who has close connections to the military and intelligence hierarchy, portrayed the decision as "almost by chance". The rape of a girl in a refugee camp was being discussed at a "top level conference in Colombo", he wrote, and "it was immediately decided that security presence was essential".

The real motivation is fear in official circles of social unrest. More than 800,000 people have been rendered homeless by the catastrophe. For the first two days, the entire administration machinery, including the armed forces, was in a state of complete paralysis. If it had not been for the actions and assistance of ordinary working people, many of the survivors could have perished.

WSWS correspondents, as well as other journalists, found that the mood of people sheltering in refuges with limited food, water and medical assistance was, after the initial shock, turning to anger. The lack of government action and the chaotic character of the official relief operations provoked bitter criticism. The victims have pointed out that none of the established political parties has visited or shown any concern. By putting the military in charge, Kumaratunga is seeking to preempt any rebelliousness.

Political tensions

These acute social and political tensions are not simply the product of the latest disaster. The decision of the previous UNF government to sign a ceasefire and enter into peace talks with the LTTE heightened a longstanding crisis within ruling circles. The dominant sections of business argued that a power-sharing arrangement with the LTTE was necessary to end the war and prevent economic collapse.

With the backing of the major powers, the UNF pursued the “peace process”—seeking a deal with the LTTE at the same time as imposing a far-reaching economic restructuring program. Kumaratunga, whose Peoples Alliance was then in opposition, joined with the JVP and the military top brass in condemning peace talks as a betrayal of the nation. Admiral Sandagiri was instrumental in a series of military provocations that undermined the government’s negotiations with the LTTE.

Matters came to a head in November 2003, shortly after the LTTE released its proposal for the establishment of an interim administration in the North and East. Declaring that the government was undermining national security, the president seized control of three key ministries and announced plans for a state of emergency. She was eventually forced to pull back under pressure from Washington and New Delhi, but, after three months of political paralysis in Colombo, arbitrarily sacked the government and called fresh elections.

Kumaratunga formed the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) with the JVP, which narrowly won the April 2004 election by appealing to widespread discontent over the UNF’s economic measures. The poll resulted in an unstable minority government and resolved none of the underlying issues. The UPFA is deeply divided over its own attempts to restart the peace process, with the JVP threatening to withdraw if negotiations proceed on the LTTE’s interim administration. At the same time, there has been growing hostility to the government over its broken election promises and the continuing decline in living standards.

The December 26 disaster has served to magnify these tensions. The government paralysis was symptomatic of the inability of the ruling class to resolve any of the fundamental problems confronting it. As the events of November 2003 indicated, sections of the ruling elite are contemplating moves towards autocratic forms of rule.

“Men of action”

The *Island* newspaper has continually hammered on this theme: appealing to popular hostility to the major political parties to justify the use of anti-democratic measures. Not surprisingly, it applauded Kumaratunga’s decision to put the military in charge of relief operations.

In an editorial on January 5 entitled “Wanted: Men of action

not party loyalists and cronies”, the newspaper lambasted the response of politicians to the disaster and their failure to provide emergency supplies. “We have been advised that army personnel who had field experience would be the best kind to be in charge of such disaster management operations. They should be able to cut through red-tape and bulldoze their way through, kicking any sacred buttocks that stand in the way,” it concluded.

Putting the military in charge of relief operations is also calculated to inflame communal tensions in the East and North. The immediate reaction of ordinary people in these areas to the tsunami was to provide assistance to the victims regardless of language, religion or ethnic background. The armed forces, however, are deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism and significant sections of the military top brass are hostile to any peace deal with the LTTE.

Since March last year, military intelligence has colluded with a breakaway LTTE faction based in the East, which has been engaged in clashes with its rivals. These actions have undermined moves to restart peace talks and brought the current ceasefire to the point of collapse.

There are now reports of friction between the armed forces and the LTTE over relief work. Accusing the LTTE of forcibly recruiting youth, the military has obstructed the work of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), an LTTE-aligned body, in relief camps. TRO executive director K.P.Reggie told a press conference last week that “Special Task Force soldiers seized two TRO tractors carrying relief goods and distributed them themselves after removing the TRO labels”.

Kumaratunga’s latest decision is a provocative action that tramples on basic democratic rights and has the potential to precipitate armed conflict in the North and East. Her last consideration is for the plight of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people—Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese—who face the biggest calamity of their lives.



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