Killing of LTTE leader raises danger of war in Sri Lanka

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The assassination of a top leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in eastern Sri Lanka on Monday has heightened the danger of a return to civil war on the island. While the Sri Lankan government condemned the killing, the LTTE has accused the military of complicity in the attack and warned that it would have a "serious impact on the humanitarian relief work" and "the recommencement of peace talks".

E. Kaushalyan, the LTTE's political leader in the East, was killed along with three other LTTE members in a government-controlled area near Welikanda in North Central Province. A. Chandra Nehru, a former Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MP travelling with Kaushalyan, was injured and later died in hospital. The only survivors were Chandra Nehru's two police bodyguards and a fifth LTTE member.

Kaushalyan is the most senior LTTE leader to be killed since a ceasefire agreement was signed between Colombo and the LTTE in February 2002. According to an LTTE statement, he was returning to the East from the northern LTTE stronghold of Kilinochchi after discussions with the LTTE leadership on relief work. The eastern coast took the full force of the December 26 tsunami, which killed at least 40,000 people in Sri Lanka and laid waste to many coastal areas.

The murder, which was clearly aimed at undermining the ceasefire, provoked a general shutdown of businesses in the districts of Batticaloa, Amparai and Trincomalee on Wednesday and Thursday. A strong element in the protests was a feeling of outrage and fears that the provocative killing would rekindle fighting. In the wake of the tsunami disaster, many ordinary Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese helped each other out and have no desire for a resumption of the 20-year civil war.

The day after the killing, the military put the eastern province on "red alert", further heightening tensions. According to the pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* website, Special Task Force (STF) police prevented people at the Mandaani refugee camp from raising black flags. STF officers also assaulted an LTTE member at Komari in the Batticaloa district when he tried to put up a flag.

During a stormy session of parliament on Wednesday, TNA MPs accused the government of bearing responsibility for the murder. TNA leader R. Sampathan pointed out that the attack was pre-planned, well-organised and took place close to several army camps. "How did the attack come from an area with a strong army presence and who would do it without being deterred by the army presence?" he asked, adding: "This attack was aimed at destabilising the peace process."

The military has denied any involvement in the killings. Batticaloa divisional commander Vajira Wijegunawardane blamed Kaushalyan for failing to heed the army's advice to travel with a military escort. But this statement raises more questions that it answers. How were the attackers able to infiltrate an area that is near the Welikanda army camp? How did they know who was travelling in Chandra Nehru's van? Under the ceasefire arrangements, the military have to be informed when LTTE members are travelling though government-controlled territory.

Even the Colombo press has raised questions about the military's denial. The *Daily Mirror* commented: "The incident has taken place in a government-controlled area between two army camps, and the Kaushalyan party had reportedly been unarmed. The security forces, therefore, have to take some responsibility for this incident." The area is under tight military surveillance because of previous clashes and attacks.

According to a Sri Lankan TV report, the breakaway LTTE faction led by V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, has claimed responsibility for the murders. Karuna, the LTTE's eastern military commander, split away last March, claiming that "northern" leaders were monopolising power at the expense of the east. The military has denied LTTE claims that the army is working with the Karuna faction in attacking the northern leadership. It was revealed last year, however, that Sri Lankan military intelligence, which has a history of manipulating the LTTE's rivals, sheltered and held discussions with Karuna and his associates in Colombo following the split.

An article in the *Daily Mirror* provided further evidence of the army's collusion with Karuna. The faction's base at Omadiyamadu, a remote village in the Polonnaruwa district, is known to the military. Two of Karuna's close associates—Pillaiyan and Iniya Barathy—operate in the town of Batticaloa. The article stated: "Residents of Batticaloa, who know the two, say they are operating from the 'Patpody camp', a military intelligence unit base near the SLAF [Sri Lankan Armed Forces] base on the town's outskirts."

The implications of Kaushalyan's murder were underscored by the fact that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan felt compelled to issue a statement. According to a spokesman, Annan urged "all parties to exercise calm and restraint so as to avoid actions that could disrupt the ceasefire agreement". Behind Annan's comments lie the fears of the major global powers that the so-called peace process in Sri Lanka is on the point of collapse.

In the wake of the tsunami, various commentators expressed the view that the disaster would create the conditions for the resumption of peace talks and a negotiated end to the civil war. Hasitha Premaratne, research head at HNB Stock Brokers, declared for instance: "The silver lining [of the tsunami] is that the prospect of war has receded. It has restored investor confidence...The government and Tigers (the LTTE) now have better things to do than fight."

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In fact, the catastrophe has only exacerbated tensions between the government and the LTTE. Within days, the two sides were at loggerheads over the handling of relief and reconstruction work in areas under LTTE control in the North and East. Colombo insisted that any relief work would be on its terms, while the LTTE maintained all aid should flow through its Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO).

The rift worsened when President Chandrika Kumaratunga declared a state of emergency and placed all relief operations under the control of the armed forces. The military is notorious for its harassment and abuse of the country's Tamil minority. During the war, emergency powers were used to round up, detain without trial and, in some cases, torture thousands of Tamils. Although a ceasefire is in place, there have been reports of STF police officers preventing the LTTE from distributing aid in government-controlled areas.

The LTTE has appealed to the "international community" for support. But the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has insisted that there will be no de facto recognition of the LTTE via relief operations. When Kofi Annan visited the island, Kumaratunga prevented him from visiting one of the rebel-held areas affected by the tsunami.

The efforts of Norwegian mediators to establish a joint mechanism to provide aid to tsunami victims have come to nothing. A high-ranking diplomatic team headed by Foreign Minister Jan Petersen visited Sri Lanka for four days in late January but failed to break the deadlock.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the second largest UPFA partner, has played a key role in stirring up anti-Tamil chauvinism and thwarting any, even limited, collaboration between the government and the LTTE to help the survivors of the tsunami. JVP spokesmen have hailed the decision to prevent Annan from visiting LTTE areas, opposed any joint relief body, and accused the LTTE and international relief organisations of smuggling in military supplies under the guise of aid.

This hostility to any concession to the LTTE highlights the deep divisions in ruling circles in Colombo over the "peace process". Sections of business, backed by the major powers, have been pushing for a negotiated end to the war in order to integrate the island into global production processes, and to take advantage of the burgeoning foreign investment in India in particular.

But the war itself has created powerful vested interests in the military, state bureaucracy and the Buddhist hierarchy. Since independence in 1948, the bourgeoisie has whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism as the means for cultivating a base for its political parties and for dividing the working class. In 1972, communalism was entrenched in the constitution, which makes Buddhism the state religion. In this political climate, any compromise with the LTTE is denounced as treachery.

The current ceasefire was signed by the United National Front (UNF) government in February 2002. But from the outset, Kumaratunga, whose party was in opposition, sought to undermine peace talks with the assistance of the military top brass and the backing of the JVP. Kumaratunga and her allies denounced the UNF for making impermissible concessions to the LTTE and endangering national security.

Attempts were made to restart the "peace process" after the LTTE pulled out of talks in April 2003. But when the LTTE submitted its proposal for an interim administration in the North and East, Kumaratunga used her extensive presidential powers to seize control of three key ministries—including defence. After a three-month standoff, she sacked the government, precipitating fresh elections in April 2004.

Kumaratunga's UPFA narrowly won the election but has proven incapable of resolving any of the problems that faced the previous UNF government. In a bid to secure international financial assistance, the president promised to restart talks with the LTTE. Nine months later, there is still no agreed basis for negotiations.

After pledging to resume "peace" talks, Kumaratunga immediately faced opposition from her allies—the military and the JVP, which is now in office for the first time. The JVP has threatened to quit the government if negotiations begin on the LTTE's demand for an interim administration. At the same time, there has been a spate of killings in the east by the LTTE and the rival Karuna faction.

Following the tsunami, some layers of the ruling elite have pushed for the armed forces to take advantage of the LTTE's weakened position to inflict a military defeat. At a January 30 press conference, Kumaratunga herself guardedly pointed to the "heavy loss of LTTE cadres and their bases". She argued publicly that this made the danger of war more remote, but in private there is no doubt that military calculations were being made.

Referring to the murder of Kaushalyan, an editorial in the *Island* newspaper commented in a supportive tone that "the east is beginning to strike back." After noting that the LTTE was in no position to return to war, the article added: "If it ever does so, it will be making a mistake given the ground situation..." Such comments reflect the thinking of sections of the military top brass who are eager to seize the opportunity to crush the LTTE. It is entirely possible that elements of the army had a hand in the killing of Kaushalyan, regarding it as a useful means for goading the LTTE to war.

The fact that the country is heading toward war, not peace, in the aftermath of the tsunami is a damning indictment of all sections of the ruling class. At least 40,000 people lost their lives in the disaster on top of more than 65,000 killed in the civil war. The lack of aid and assistance is already generating hostility and anger among the tsunami survivors, with protests occurring in a number of areas.

During her visit, Norway's international development minister Hilde Johnson bluntly told the Colombo press: "Impatience is growing and frustration is growing more [among people over aid]. The government, the LTTE and the international community need to focus on this before it leads to tension." It is unlikely, however, that the warning will be heeded. Incapable of satisfying the needs of working people, the ruling class will respond, as it has to every political crisis over the last half century, by deliberately whipping up communal antagonisms—even if it means a return to war.

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