Killing in northern Sri Lanka: a sign of sharp tensions

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An incident last week involving the killing of a young Tamil barber in northern Sri Lanka has highlighted the fragility of the present three-year-old ceasefire between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tami Eelam (LTTE).

On August 4, five Sri Lankan soldiers arrived at a local barber's saloon at Inuvil junction, about four kilometres from Jaffna town, at about 12.45 p.m. Two soldiers went inside for a haircut, handing their automatic rifles to the others who waited outside.

A few minutes later, a bullet fired from one of the rifles pierced the front wall, made of metal sheeting, injuring two of the barbers. Jeyaseelan Shantharooban, 23, was hit in the head and died on admission to Jaffna Hospital. K. Logathas, 29, was hospitalised with his injuries.

The shooting brought residents into the street and troops running from nearby quarters. An angry crowd blocked the road and stoned arriving army vehicles, demanding that the soldiers involved be brought to justice. Riot police were finally mobilised and dispersed the protesters using tear gas.

As the clash was taking place, Charles Wijewardena, senior police superintendent for the Jaffna district, was abducted and later found dead at Palavodai, two kilometres away. According to official accounts, he had been trying to defuse the protest. Fearing further protests, police clamped a curfew on the area for 32 hours.

Last Friday, two soldiers were taken before the Mallakam area magistrate under heavy guard and remanded until August 20. While police initially arrested all five soldiers involved in the incident, three were released after a preliminary inquiry. Police simply claimed they had no arms at the time and therefore could not have been involved in the actual shooting.

The dead barber Shantharooban was from a poor family in the eastern district of Trincomalee. There were eight in his family and only three had jobs. Shantharooban's uncle owned the "saloon"—a hut patched together from sheets cut from metal drums. Family members said they received no help from politicians or the LTTE. The union of saloon workers provided 5,000 rupees ($US50) for Shantharooban's funeral.

At this stage, it is not clear whether the shooting was deliberate. The military immediately claimed that the killing of Shantharooban was accidental and released photographs on Monday as "proof". The other saloon employee told the WSWS that he believed that the shooting was not deliberate.

On the other hand, however, the military and the Colombo media immediately accused the LTTE's area leaders of murdering police superintendent Wijewardena. No evidence has been offered and the LTTE has denied any involvement.

The most significant response to the incident came from President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is desperate to push through an agreement with the LTTE for the joint distribution of tsunami aid. In a statement last Friday, she condemned the killing of both Shantharooban and Wijewardena. Normally a staunch defender of the military and its crimes, Kumaratunga was clearly worried that the incident had the potential to derail the aid deal and the ceasefire.

In a second statement on Friday, Kumaratunga confirmed that two soldiers involved in the incident had "acted in contravention of military regulations on several counts... The president is perturbed by the frequency of these provocative incidents during the past several weeks. These incidents seem to be deliberately contrived by extremist elements to invite reprisals

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leading to the escalation of the conflict situation prevailing in the North and East."

Kumaratunga's comments are a pointed recognition of sharp divisions in the military and that "extremists elements" are seeking to sabotage the aid agreement and precipitate "escalating conflict". The president obviously feels she has grounds for believing that the murder of Shantharooban was a calculated provocation. In an effort to pacify the situation, she announced the government would pay compensation to his family.

Whether or not the killing was intentional, the military has been engaged on one provocation after another since the ceasefire was signed in February 2002. Up until April 2004, when her Sri Lanka Freedom Party was in opposition, the president actively colluded with elements of the armed forces top brass in undermining the United National Party-led government's negotiations with the LTTE.

With her party in power, however, Kumaratunga has tried to restart talks and, as a result, has faced resistance from sections of the military. Over the last year, elements of the armed forces have been tacitly backing a breakaway LTTE faction which is challenging the LTTE for dominance in the east of the island. A series of murky killings by both factions have taken place over the past year, calling the ceasefire in the region in question.

Obviously acting under Kumaratunga's instructions, the military met with LTTE officials on Friday to discuss Jaffna incident. An LTTE spokesman called on the military to reduce its forces in densely populated areas. Security forces commander for Jaffna, Sunil Tennakoon, effectively dismissed the request, declaring that the military would take stern action against anyone who "violates law and order".

Tensions are already extremely high in the North and East of the island, where the bitter 20-year civil war has been fought. The heavily armed troops and military vehicles maintain a high profile throughout the government-controlled areas. The military presence only exacerbates hostility and anger over unemployment, high prices and the lack of aid for tsunami victims.

The killings and minor clashes continue. On August 5, the LTTE office at Kalavanchikudi in the eastern Batticaloa district was attacked. At Eravur also in the East, a Tamil youth was shot dead on August 7. On the same day, three soldiers were injured when their vehicle was attacked at Mirusuvil in Jaffna. At Kanjirankuda junction on the Akkaraipattu-Pottuvil main road, two LTTE members were shot dead by unidentified gunmen.

In an interview last weekend, Hagrup Haukland, head of the Sri Lankan peace-monitoring mission, cautiously summed up the situation. "We don't think war is imminent at all," he told Reuters, but then added: "The longer it goes before they are on speaking terms (peace talks), the higher is the risk for clashes. The climate is not good between the parties at the moment."

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