

Sri Lankan military heightens tensions in the North and East

Our correspondent
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Provocative actions by the Sri Lankan security forces following the assassination of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on August 12 have heightened tensions in the north and east of the island and threatened a breakdown of the tenuous ceasefire between the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

On August 17, police, backed by squads of heavily-armed soldiers in six trucks and two jeeps, surrounded the village of Kalati on the outskirts of Jaffna town in northern Sri Lanka. The police entered the village and arrested a senior LTTE official, K. Gopi, over the killing of a police superintendent, Charles Wijewardena, in early August. While Gopi was being arrested, two police officers were injured during an exchange of fire.

The media in Colombo immediately hailed the arrest and declared the police to be heroes. It is not even clear, however, that LTTE fighters shot the officers. Tamil newspapers cited eyewitnesses who said the police injuries had been caused by the troops opening fire. Furthermore, they questioned how four LTTE members allegedly involved in the shooting managed to escape through the cordon of soldiers.

The *Island* newspaper seized on the incident to demand even tougher measures against the LTTE. In an editorial on August 20, the paper denounced the alleged LTTE violence on August 17 as a breach of the ceasefire. It insisted that the government call for the opening up of LTTE territory, “without meekly partaking of all the humble pie dished out”.

The editorial reflects the sentiments of layers of the ruling elite, including the military top brass, who have been hostile to the ceasefire from the outset. By immediately blaming Kadirgamar’s murder on the LTTE, they have been demanding what amounts to an

ultimatum to the LTTE to accept new restrictions or face war. The *Island* editorial pointedly recalled the pre-ceasefire activities of the army’s “long rangers”—assassination squads sent to murder top LTTE leaders.

Gopi’s arrest marks the first time since the ceasefire was signed in February 2002 that a senior LTTE official has been seized. Despite the LTTE’s protests that the detention violated the ceasefire, the police refused to release Gopi and flew him to Colombo for interrogation. Police insisted that he take part in an identification parade even though he has a well-known physical handicap—he previously lost a hand in fighting.

The Colombo media has been virtually silent on the incident that led to the murder of Charles Wijewardena. Two Tamil barbers, Jeyaseelan Shantharoban and K. Logathas, were shot after Sri Lankan soldiers arrived at their makeshift shop at Inuvil junction. Shantharoban later died in hospital. The outrage triggered an angry protest, which was broken up by riot police using tear gas. Wijewardena, who was overseeing the operation, was seized and later found dead.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, normally a staunch defender of the military, confirmed that the soldiers involved had contravened military regulations. Her statement declared: “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 leading to the escalation of the conflict situation prevailing in the North and East.”

Since Kadirgamar’s murder, the “provocative incidents” have only escalated. The military has deployed groups of soldiers at 18 police stations in Jaffna, supposedly to defend police officers from LTTE attack after Gopi’s arrest. The move amounts to

establishing small military camps in the midst of densely populated areas, antagonising Tamils who have bitter experiences with security forces during two decades of war.

Using the emergency powers put in place after Kadirgamar's assassination, the military has recommenced arbitrary large-scale cordon-and-search operations for the first time since the ceasefire was signed. On the morning of August 16, hundreds of soldiers surrounded and swept through areas of the northern town of Mannar and suburbs. The following day, the Sri Lankan navy conducted a cordon-and-search operation in the Pallimunai coastal area of the Mannar district. No reason was given and no arrests were made. The only purpose can be to create a climate of fear and intimidation.

The Sri Lankan military has extended such operations to the eastern district around Trincomalee. At least one night search has been conducted and new checkpoints set up in the area. Tensions in Trincomalee are already high after a Sinhala chauvinist group provocatively erected a Buddha statue in the town with the backing of the North East Sinhala Organisation (NESO), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

When Tamil organisations protested, the military deployed a large contingent of soldiers in the town. Last week, the Trincomalee District Tamil Student Union organised a boycott in the town to protest against the presence of large numbers of military personnel near their schools. The security forces have established many checkpoints and conduct extensive patrols throughout the town.

In the Eastern Province, clashes have intensified between the LTTE and a breakaway LTTE faction headed by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna. Last week Karuna loyalists attacked LTTE members at the village of Kirimichchai, killing and injuring several. According to a report in the *Island*, the victors then brazenly displayed the bodies at a local government school in an area controlled by the military.

Yesterday the Karuna faction attacked an LTTE camp at Kattamuri killing at least nine LTTE members and injuring a dozen more. The LTTE has repeatedly accused the army of aiding Karuna in killing its fighters and officials.

Amid growing tensions in the North and East, there

are signs that the military top brass is preparing for open conflict. High-level commanders recently visited Jaffna to assess the military's deployment and the steps needed to strengthen its forces. The delegation included armed forces chief Vice Admiral Daya Sandagiri and army commander General Shantha Kottegoda. According to media reports, the defence attaché of the US embassy in Colombo accompanied the group.



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