

Killing of Sri Lankan soldiers heightens tensions on Jaffna peninsula

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The deaths of 14 Sri Lankan soldiers in two separate attacks on Sunday and Tuesday has significantly raised tensions between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The killings come amid rising violence in the North and East of the island involving the LTTE, the armed forces and various paramilitary outfits aligned to the military.

The first attack on Sunday took place at Kondavil near the northern Jaffna town. Six soldiers died when two claymore mines detonated next to a tractor on which they were travelling. Another soldier later died of his injuries. The government and military immediately blamed the LTTE for the incident, which the US State Department also condemned as a breach of the ceasefire.

Seven more soldiers were killed yesterday in another attack using a claymore mine at Irupalai, north of Jaffna town. According to the military, the troops were returning to their base on a tractor after a routine foot patrol. A government statement accused the LTTE of being “engaged in a stealth war against Sri Lankan security forces using the cover of the ceasefire agreement”.

The LTTE denied any involvement in the attacks. Spokesman Daya Master declared yesterday: “We are not going to break the ceasefire agreement.” Whether or not the LTTE was directly responsible, the killings have heightened the danger of a return to war.

At a press conference on Monday, newly elected President Mahinda Rajapakse declared that the country would remain on “war alert” and called on the security forces to take whatever action necessary for “self-defence”. The military rushed dispatched reinforcements to the Jaffna peninsula after a meeting between Rajapakse and defence chiefs.

These moves will only heighten what is already an

extremely tense situation in the North and East. The military has 25,000 troops on the Jaffna peninsula alone and acts as an army of occupation through a system of roadblocks, checkpoints and patrols aimed at harassing and intimidating the Tamil minority. In recent months, the armed forces have carried out a series of provocative searches.

WSWS correspondents in Jaffna report that in key areas groups of heavily armed troops are stationed every 200 to 300 metres. Even the elderly are being subject to identity checks. The areas where the attacks took place have been sealed off and subjected to intensive searches. There is widespread fear of a return to full-scale war.

The security forces have moved quickly to suppress protests. On Monday, police used tear gas to break up a protest by students in Point Pedro demanding the removal of checkpoints near their college and a nearly Methodist girls’ college. Further demonstrations by students and their parents from Vadamarachchi took place yesterday.

In Colombo, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) seized on the attacks to further inflame communal tensions. JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa condemned the killings on national television yesterday and declared that the ceasefire was an “agreement of betrayal”.

Rajapakse relied heavily on the JVP in the course of his campaign for the November 17 presidential poll. His electoral pacts with the JVP and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) committed him to a number of provocative steps against the LTTE, including a revision of the ceasefire to strengthen the position of the Sri Lankan armed forces.

Since being installed, Rajapakse has been engaged in a balancing act between the demands of his Sinhala

chauvinist allies and those of big business and the major powers for a revival of the stalled “peace process”. To appease the former, he has promised to modernise the military and appointed Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, widely considered “a hardliner,” as army commander.

In a press conference yesterday, Fonseka spoke dismissively of the LTTE’s capacity for full-scale conventional war, saying it had only 4,000 to 5,000 hardened fighters. “I have a lot of battle field experience with the LTTE and they won’t judge me as a weak man. I hope to be a challenge to any terrorist activity in the country,” he said. Referring to the attack on Sunday, he bluntly declared: “These types of incidents have to be stopped.”

Sections of the Colombo press have seized on the latest attacks to demand tougher action against the LTTE. An editorial in the *Island* newspaper berated “the international community” stating: “They [the soldiers] have become the sacrificial lamb on the altar of the ceasefire. Nowhere else in the world would a sovereign state have tolerated such atrocities so subserviently. But, a prisoner of the donor community which is soft pedalling LTTE terror and using aid as a weapon, Sri Lanka cannot even defend herself.”

Such comments ignore the fact that the military has had a significant role in the violence that has been escalating throughout the North and East. In the eastern areas in particular, the military has provided tacit support to an LTTE breakaway group headed by V. Muralitharan (Karuna) in its attacks on LTTE fighters and officials. The Colombo media, which is quick to condemn the LTTE, turns a blind eye to the activities of the Karuna group and other paramilitary outfits aligned to the armed forces.

Elements within the military top brass have made no secret of their hostility to the “peace process”. The current armed forces chief Admiral Daya Sandagiri, in league with previous president Chandrika Kumaratunga, staged several provocative attacks on LTTE vessels in 2003 that led to the breakdown of peace talks. It is highly likely that the armed forces, the military intelligence in particular, has had a hand in escalating tensions in recent weeks.

In the past week alone, there have been several suspicious incidents. On the Jaffna peninsula, two young farmers were killed at Neerveli on December 1.

The LTTE accused “intelligence operatives” working with the army of murdering the two because of their involvement in the LTTE’s annual Heroes Day ceremony. The deaths provoked a widespread protest on Friday and Saturday and clashes with police.

In the eastern Batticaloa district, the killing of a Muslim on Saturday led to communal clashes in which two Tamils were hacked to death. Three more Muslims were found dead on Sunday and another two yesterday. The government and the military immediately blamed the LTTE, which denied the allegation. The LTTE-aligned Tamilnet website reported yesterday that two members of the Karuna group surrendered to the LTTE. They admitted to carrying out the murders and operating from a camp run by the elite police commando unit—the special task force.

It is not possible to verify whether the LTTE’s allegations are correct or not. What is certain, however, is that for months, there has been a murky armed conflict taking place in the war zones of the East and North, involving not only the LTTE, but the military and its paramilitary allies. The election of Rajapakse, who campaigned in conjunction with the JVP on a series of provocative ultimatums to the LTTE, has added an incendiary new factor to a highly volatile situation.



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