Open warfare erupts in Sri Lanka

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27 April 2006

After weeks of escalating violence in a murky, undeclared war in the North and East of Sri Lanka, the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have resorted to open hostilities. While the immediate trigger was a carefully-planned suicide bombing at army headquarters in central Colombo on Tuesday, the responsibility for the conflict rests squarely with successive Sri Lankan governments which for more than three years have refused to enter into meaningful negotiations.

Tuesday's attack involved a female suicide bomber, dressed as a pregnant woman, who pretended to be visiting the army hospital near the heavily-guarded, high security zone. She waited for the arrival of army chief, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, and detonated her explosives, killing eight people on the spot and wounding 27 others, mainly military personnel.

While it has officially denied responsibility, there can be little doubt that the LTTE organised and authorised the attack. Suicide bombings have been the LTTE's trademark. In all likelihood, Fonseka was targetted because of his public agitation for tougher measures against the LTTE. He was critically injured but survived the blast. The attack on the military headquarters in the country's capital was designed to send a message that no one in the military or government is immune.

President Mahinda Rajapakse and the military immediately seized on the bombing as the pretext to launch air and artillery attacks on LTTE bases in the Sampoor area near the eastern city of Trincomalee. Another clash took place at nearby Muttur. There is no doubt that the attacks had been planned well in advance. The LTTE presence close to key strategic army and navy bases in Trincomalee had long been the subject of criticism in the Colombo press from military sources.

According to LTTE spokesmen, the air raid in the Sampoor area levelled houses and killed at least 12 people, including civilians. Estimates of the number of refugees fleeing from Muttur and Sampoor vary between 15,000 and 40,000. The military blames the attack in Muttur on the LTTE, claiming that three Muslims were killed by LTTE mortar rounds. The main A9 road, which runs through military- and LTTE-controlled areas on the northern Jaffna peninsula, has been closed.

Both the government and the LTTE claim to be for "peace" and neither side has officially abrogated the ceasefire. But all the signs are pointing toward a rapid slide back to all-out civil war that will have devastating consequences for working people on the island—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike. More than 65,000 people were killed in two decades of brutal conflict prior to 2002. Many more were maimed or turned into refugees.

Both sides are threatening war. LTTE spokesman S. Pulidevan told the media: "They are firing with artillery and cannons. It is like a war situation in Trincomalee. If the attacks continue, the LTTE will be forced to take military defensive action." LTTE leader in Trincomalee S.S. Elilan warned: "We are in a state of readiness and are waiting for the instruction from our leadership to respond with force that will be catastrophically disabling and devastating to the enemy."

Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella was no less bellicose, declaring: "There's no duration or limits on defence matters. If the LTTE continues its attacks, there will be coordinated retaliation or defence. This will continue as long as the LTTE targets the security forces." In his comments, Media Minister Anura Priyadarsahna Yapa denied that the ceasefire was in a shambles after the first open breaches by the Sri Lankan military, saying only "it's a bit of a low".

Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) head Major General Ulf Henricsson warned that if the airstrikes continued, peace talks would be difficult. The worst-case scenario was a return to war, he said. "I think the parties are not prepared for that. And if they were, it would be devastating for the people of Sri Lanka and for their own military capabilities," he added.

However, the so-called peace process sponsored by the major foreign powers has ground to a halt. Negotiations were held in Geneva in February for the first time in nearly three years, but nearly broke down when the Rajapakse government called for major revisions to the current ceasefire. In the end, both sides pledged to adhere to and implement the agreement, but the subterranean conflict in the East and North has continued.

A second round of talks, due to take place on April 19-21, was rescheduled for April 24-25 then cancelled altogether. The initial disagreement was over the transport of LTTE commanders from the eastern province to LTTE headquarters in the northern Wanni area, after the government refused to provide a military helicopter as had been previously done. The LTTE later pulled out, citing the government's failure to disarm Tamil paramilitaries and to end continuing attacks on its members in the East.

President Rajapakse made a televised national address on Tuesday night just four hours after the attacks on the LTTE. He praised the military for "patience and restraint" and appealed to the major powers for support against the LTTE. "It is abundantly clear to the international community today that the response of the LTTE to the peaceful appeals by our government to settle disputes through negotiations is the use of the suicide bomber," he declared.

His comments are utterly hypocritical. Rajapakse narrowly won the presidential election last November after signing formal electoral agreements with two Sinhala extremist parties—Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). The deals contained a series of measures, including a complete revision of the ceasefire, which amounted to an ultimatum to the LTTE.

While Rajapakse declared that he was "a man of peace," the military reimposed repressive security measures on the Tamil minority and covertly backed Tamil paramilitary groups in a series of attacks on LTTE cadres and sympathisers. There was a lull in the violence during

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the first round of Geneva talks, but the attacks and counterattacks escalated dramatically after the assassination of pro-LTTE politician V. Vigneswaran on April 7. In the last fortnight, at least 100 people, including military personnel, LTTE members and civilians, have been killed in a mounting cycle of violence.

Since the Geneva talks in February, Rajapakse has come under growing pressure from his chauvinists allies to take a more aggressive stance toward the LTTE. His minority government is dependent on the JVP and JHU for parliamentary support. In the lead up to the second round of talks, the JVP leadership was again insisting that Rajapakse push for changes to the ceasefire agreement.

The JVP branded Tuesday's suicide bombing as a declaration of war and urged the government to abrogate the ceasefire altogether. JVP general secretary Tilvan Silva yesterday declared: "The CFA [ceasefire agreement] is dead. Its conditions and rulings no longer apply and the government need not bother any more about it." JVP parliamentary group leader Wimal Weerawansa called for all parties to unite around Rajapakse "for the defence of motherland against terrorism".

The opposition United National Party (UNP), which on behalf of big business has pushed for a negotiated end to the war, is also coming under pressure to take a tougher stance. After meeting with Rajapakse, UNP deputy general secretary Tissa Attanayake condemned the suicide bombing and warned: "If the peace process is to be fruitful, the LTTE should take immediate action to control their violent actions." Previously the UNP has blamed the JVP and JHU for inciting communal tensions.

Like Rajapakse, the Colombo media still speak abstractly of peace, but are clearly preparing for war. An editorial in the right-wing *Island* yesterday declared: "Yesterday's attack has blasted hopes of Geneva talks, which the LTTE is all out to scuttle. One may wonder whether the truce is holding any longer with the LTTE committing such acts of terror as are suggestive of war already begun. It is incumbent upon the government to ready itself for any eventuality, while trekking the path of peace cautiously avoiding mines."

The *Daily Mirror*, which has been generally supportive of peace talks, published an editorial today calling for unity against "fierce terrorists who have no respect for life or liberty". The newspaper feebly called for Rajapakse to resist calls for retaliation against the LTTE, declaring: "The government, however, is obliged to act responsibly, without letting the country slide into the precipice of a disastrous war, as long as the doors to talks remain open."

The US and other major powers have backed the peace process as a means of ending a conflict that is a destabilising influence on the India subcontinent. None of them are concerned, however, about the suffering that the war has inflicted on the Sri Lankan masses. Washington in particular has been forging closer ties with India as a means of advancing US strategic and economic interests in the increasingly important region.

The US, the EU, Japan and India have all condemned the suicide bombing and called on both sides to adhere to the ceasefire and return to negotiations. In New Delhi, the Indian government convened its Crisis Management Group on Wednesday to assess the situation and dispatched additional warships to the Palk Straits between India and Sri Lanka.

In Washington, however, there was a shift in emphasis. US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher stated: "It is regrettable that the Tamil Tigers have decided to restart the war instead of restarting the peace process. We are in touch with governments around the world to bring to bear what ever pressure we can on the Tamil Tigers to abandon this course of action and to look for ways that we can support the government in coping with the threat."

Boucher's comments place all blame for war on the LTTE. Significantly, he called not only for a return to the negotiating table, but for international support for Colombo "in coping with the threat". In January, US ambassador to Sri Lanka Jeffrey Lunstead was more explicit, warning the LTTE that if there was an outbreak of war, it would face "a stronger, more capable and more determined Sri Lankan military".

The slide towards open war is a damning indictment of all sections of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. The vast majority of the island's population, who will inevitably be forced to pay the price of any conflict, do not want war. Yet the ruling class, which has proven completely incapable of meeting the aspirations of working people for basic democratic rights and decent living standards, has time and again resorted to whipping up communal tensions to divide workers and shore up the Sri Lankan state.

It is no accident that the escalating conflict in the North and East coincides with strikes and protests by workers, farmers and the poor against the impact of the government's IMF-dictated austerity program and market reforms. Hundreds of thousands of public sector workers have recently taken part in two major one-day protests to demand pay rises to cope with skyrocketting costs. Just last week, the cash-strapped Rajapakse government announced that it would cut fuel subsidies and slash fertiliser subsidies for all rural sectors, except for rice farmers.

As for the LTTE, it faces growing hostility from the Tamil minority over its anti-democratic methods and arbitrary imposition of taxes. Four years after signing of the ceasefire, hundreds of thousands of people are still living in refugee camps. Most Tamils have seen no significant improvement in their living standards. With no perspective for a progressive resolution to the conflict, the LTTE leadership, like its Sinhala counterparts in Colombo, may well consider war as the only means of resolving its political crisis.

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