

Major naval battle: Sri Lanka plunges toward open civil war

K. Ratnayake
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In a major escalation of the conflict in Sri Lanka, the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fought a pitched naval battle on Thursday in the seas near the northern fishing village of Vettilaikerni. Up to 50 are estimated to have died on both sides. In retaliation, the military launched a series of air strikes and artillery attacks on LTTE positions, including near the rebel headquarters of Kilinochchi.

While the Colombo government and media immediately denounced the LTTE for initiating the attack, the latest incident follows a long series of provocations by anti-LTTE Tamil paramilitaries working with sections of the Sri Lankan military. While the 2002 ceasefire between the LTTE and the government still is formally in place, the island's undeclared war in the North and East is accelerating.

According to the Sri Lankan military, up to 15 LTTE boats attacked a naval convoy, comprising a troop carrier with 700 soldiers on board—the Pearl Cruise II—and four patrol boats, on Thursday afternoon. In the two-hour battle, an LTTE vessel laden with explosives rammed and sunk one of the naval gunboats, killing 17 sailors, including two officers, and one army signalman. The navy claimed its patrol boats, with air support, destroyed five LTTE vessels and damaged several others, killing at least 30 LTTE members.

The LTTE accused the navy of disrupting its sea exercises and provoking the clash. It claimed to have damaged another naval craft, which sank near Point Pedro, and to have lost only four of its fighters. However, the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which had observers on the Pearl Cruise II, accused the LTTE of “gross violations” of the ceasefire and of carrying out “an offensive operation”.

The LTTE criticised the SLMM for “partiality” and insisted on its right to conduct naval exercises. An LTTE statement warned the SLMM against travelling on board

naval vessels in the future, declaring: “If you choose to ignore our warning and request, we are not responsible for the consequences.”

Both sides have effectively been on a war footing for months amid escalating violence following the election of President Rajapakse last November. While the government routinely denies any involvement in attacks on LTTE personnel and positions, there is growing evidence of the military's involvement with various Tamil paramilitaries in carrying out killings designed to inflame communal tensions. At talks in Geneva in February, the government agreed to implement the ceasefire clauses requiring it to disarm militia operating in army-controlled areas, but that undertaking has not been carried out.

On Thursday, SLMM monitor Jouni Suninen told Reuters: “We have very strong indications that at least part of the government troops have been involved in these killings.” He took the correspondent to a spot where the sister of a suspected LTTE member was shot dead—just 60 metres from an army checkpoint. SLMM investigator Jukka Heiskanen took statements from the three soldiers on duty, who claimed to have heard nothing. Rejecting the claims as completely implausible, he told the newsagency: “It is ridiculous. They don't even try to make things up.”

Government spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva told parliament this week, “the government vehemently condemns the recent killings of civilians in Jaffna, Vavuniya and Avissawella and will take necessary action to punish the perpetrators”. These comments are also absurd. The military and police have imposed heavy security in areas under its control in the eastern and northern war zones, regularly harassing and intimidating Tamils, as well as carrying out extensive sweeps to “detain LTTE suspects”. Yet no one involved in the increasing number of disappearances and murders has

been arrested, let alone charged and punished.

Efforts to convene another round of peace talks in Geneva, due last month, have stalled. Japan's special envoy Yasushi Akashi spent four days in Sri Lanka this week but failed to convince the government and the LTTE to return to negotiations. LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran snubbed him during his visit to the LTTE headquarters in Kilinochchi. Political wing leader S.P. Thamilchelvan told Akashi the LTTE would not participate until the end of "warlike attacks by the Sri Lanka armed forces".

Akashi speaks on behalf of the Co-Chairs of the so-called Sri Lankan peace process—the US, Japan, the European Union and Norway. Increasingly the Co-Chairs have adopted a more menacing stance toward the LTTE, while praising the Rajapakse government for its restraint. In comments to the Colombo media, Akashi condemned the LTTE's April 25 attack on the army headquarters in Colombo, while appealing to the government only "to ensure the armed forces did not go beyond their responsibilities".

In doing so, the major powers are tacitly allowing the Sri Lankan government and the military to adopt a more provocative stance toward the LTTE. Akashi reminded the media that donor countries were offering "a peace dividend" of \$4.5 billion if the war was ended. But increasingly the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government and its Sinhala extremist backers such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) are intent on war. Rajapakse's posturing as a man of peace is in large part aimed at painting the LTTE as the aggressor and enlisting international support to militarily crush it.

Last weekend Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera visited New Delhi for a round of talks with senior Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. While publicly calling on India to tell the LTTE to return to talks, one of the main purposes of Samaraweera's mission was to urge the Indian government to sign a defence agreement between the two countries. In December 2003, military commander General Lionel Balagalle leaked details of the proposed pact, revealing plans for extensive military cooperation in areas of intelligence, air support and joint naval operations that would significantly enhance the Sri Lankan military's capacity to defeat the LTTE.

The deal was put on hold after provoking opposition from parties in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which are sympathetic to the LTTE. While the politics of Tamil Nadu remain a factor, the Indian government is hostile to the LTTE and fears any LTTE victories would

have a destabilising influence on the subcontinent. Samaraweera reportedly spoke to Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee last weekend about the pact, but received no commitment. While there was no formal agreement, the Indian military is undoubtedly cooperating with its Sri Lankan counterparts. The Indian press even indicated yesterday that Indian warships might have appeared near the scene of Thursday's battle to scare off the LTTE vessels.

The sham character of Rajapakse's public talk of peace is most clearly exposed by his continuing reliance on the JVP, which is campaigning for war with the LTTE. JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa told parliament during a recent debate over the extension of the country's emergency powers: "We should look at the terrorist challenge. They have already started Eelam war 4. We have to answer them directly in their language. All [parties] should get together in this endeavor. There is no other alternative."

Speaking subsequently to the JVP-aligned Patriotic National Movement, he declared: "As the Tiger organisation has brought the Sri Lankan motherland to the brink of division and the country has been drawn into a fourth Eelam war there is no alternative but defeating them militarily." He criticised the government for trying to appease the "international community" by continuing to speak about a negotiated settlement.

While the Sri Lankan political establishment and the military are preparing to plunge the country back into a devastating civil war, the vast majority of the population does not want a renewal of the conflict that has already cost 65,000 lives. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka has consistently opposed the drive to war and politically fought to unite working people—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—in an independent movement based on socialist policies to fight for their class interests. We urge our readers to carefully consider the issues raised in the statement by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias entitled "A socialist answer to the danger of war in Sri Lanka" issued on March 11.



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