

Escalating violence in eastern Sri Lanka

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Over the past six months, as Sri Lanka has slid toward full-scale civil war, hundreds of people have been killed, including many innocent civilians. Tens of thousands have been displaced and several thousand have fled to India and other countries.

The eastern district of Trincomalee is one centre of the escalating conflict. Clashes between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and rival Tamil paramilitary groups, covertly backed by the military, are taking place virtually every day. Trincomalee town has an important harbour and is the site of a major navy base.

An explosive factor in the situation is the anti-LTTE militia led by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, the former LTTE military commander for the eastern Batticaloa-Amparai districts. He broke from the LTTE in 2004, along with about a third of its fighters, accusing the “northern” leadership of discriminating against “easterners”. The Karuna group operates its own political front, collaborates with the military and is widely believed to be responsible for many of the attacks on LTTE cadre and supporters.

Communal tensions in the East have been deliberately heightened by Sinhala extremists opposed to the current ceasefire and any negotiated end to the war. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and North-East Sinhala Organisation (NESO) are all active in Trincomalee district and have been involved in several provocations against the local Tamil population.

The violence in the North and East accelerated rapidly after the cold-blooded murder of pro-LTTE parliamentarian Joseph Pararajasingham by unidentified gunmen during a church service in Batticaloa on December 25. The military attempted to blame the LTTE for the killing, but quickly dropped the claim when it became evident that one of the pro-government paramilitaries was involved. A previously

unknown group, calling itself the Sennan Brigade of the Eastern Soil, claimed responsibility.

A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporter, who visited Trincomalee town recently, described oppressive security measures in the area. After the ceasefire was signed in 2002, road blocks and checkpoints along the main Colombo-Trincomalee road were lifted. Now they have returned with some 7,000 soldiers and police deployed along the 84-kilometre stretch from Habarana to Trincomalee.

“All military personnel are wearing helmets and are fully armed. Some wear masks to cover their faces. From Habarana on, the checkpoints are manned by the military and police at every junction, then a checkpoint can be seen every one kilometre. When you get near Trincomalee town, they are at every 200 metres.

“At these checkpoints, if you are Sinhalese, there is not much of a problem. Soldiers may just look at your government identity card. But if you are a Tamil or Muslim then there is a lot of harassment. They check your identity card, bag and baggage, and you face questioning of all sorts. People have to get out of their vehicles 100 metres before the checkpoint. Then they have to walk, carrying their luggage and kids to the checkpoint and then for another 50 metres or so to get back into their vehicle.”

In the town, apart from army and police foot patrols, armed vehicles roamed everywhere. There was constant harassment of Tamils and Muslims. Soldiers or the police could suddenly stop people, demand their identity cards, search their belongings and interrogate them. It was like a city under siege, with everyone fearful of security searches and violent attacks.

At night, apart from Trincomalee town and immediate surrounding areas, the military and police retreated to their camps. In many areas of the district, the LTTE dominated after dusk. Two Buddhist temples had been turned into army encampments, with soldiers

guarding and using the premises.

While the whole Sri Lankan population has been hit by rising prices, particularly for fuel and transport, living conditions in the North and East have deteriorated even more markedly. The heavy security presence and constant fear of violence has impacted on business. Fishermen in Trincomalee have been left without any income after the navy banned fishing.

According to an article in the *Sunday Leader*, 3,226 people have fled to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu since the beginning of the year—95 percent of them from Trincomalee. It involves a difficult journey across the island to Mannar in the north west and across the Palk Strait to India. An estimated 60,000 Sri Lankan refugees live in camps in southern India as a result of two decades of war.

On May 22, the navy caught 122 Tamils trying to flee from Mannar in fishing boats. They are now sheltering in churches in the Mannar area but are being pressured by the military to return to Trincomalee. Pasupathy, a female refugee, told the *Daily Mirror*: “We will not return to our homes in Trincomalee. If the government tries to forcibly take us [back], they can shoot us dead right now and take our bodies or, we will kill ourselves and then we can be taken back to Trincomalee.”

A list of the violent incidents in the eastern districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa reported in the press since the beginning of June gives an indication of what people face.

* On June 1, a co-operative development officer, Selvarajah Gajanathan, was abducted after coming from an LTTE-controlled area to the government-held area in Muttur in order to arrange the transport of dry rations.

* On June 2, unidentified gunmen killed two passengers, including a 12-year-boy, and injured several others travelling in a bus from Muttur to Trincomalee.

* On June 7, a mine exploded at the village of Nedunkal in the Batticaloa district, killing 10 people, including a 6-month-old baby and injuring others, who were travelling on a tractor. The LTTE blamed the army and an allied paramilitary group. The military, as it routinely does, denied any involvement.

* On June 9, armed members of a paramilitary group arrested six students in Batticaloa town, provoking angry complaints from local people.

* On June 9, security forces detained 21 youth in Eravur in the Batticaloa district who were from an LTTE-controlled area. Only 12 were released.

* On June 12, an LTTE political official in Batticaloa, Ramanitharan, was shot dead. The LTTE alleged that an army sniper was responsible. On the same day, the military announced that an LTTE sniper had killed Lance Corporal M. Karunaratna at Vavunathivu in Batticaloa.

* On June 12, the military arbitrarily rounded up 300 young men from several villages in the Batticaloa district. They were paraded before masked men who were believed to be from a pro-government paramilitary group. One youth was picked out and detained as an LTTE suspect.

The Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission, which oversees the tenuous 2002 ceasefire, has described the situation in the North and East of the island as “a low intensity war” and stated that the army is collaborating with armed Tamil militia such as the Karuna group in attacking the LTTE. While the government and the military routinely deny the accusations, they bear the chief responsibility for pushing the country back toward full scale war.



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