

Killing of Sri Lankan general: another sign of civil war

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The killing of a senior Sri Lankan army commander on Monday is further confirmation of an escalating civil war on the island. While the government has seized on the incident to blame the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the escalating violence, Colombo bears the main political responsibility for plunging the country back into military conflict.

The assassination, which was obviously well planned, was carried out by a suicide bomber who rammed his motorbike into a vehicle carrying Major General Parami Kulatunga. The general, his two military aides and a civilian were pronounced dead on admission to the Colombo National Hospital. About seven people were injured in the attack, which occurred at Pannipitiya, about 15 kilometres southeast of Colombo at about 7.45 a.m.

Kulatunga was the army's deputy chief of staff and third ranking officer. He was commander of all security forces in the Vanni area of the northern province, where the LTTE has its headquarters and controls much of the territory. Kulatunga led some of the major military operations against the LTTE before the 2002 ceasefire.

While it has not claimed responsibility, the LTTE almost certainly carried out the attack. Suicide bombings have long been the LTTE's trademark. In late April, another carefully planned suicide bombing at the heavily fortified army headquarters in central Colombo almost claimed the life of army commander, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka. Ten others, mostly military personnel, were killed.

In comments reported by the *New York Times*, LTTE spokesman Daya Master criticised the government for immediately accusing the LTTE, but he did not deny the LTTE's responsibility for the attack. An article on the pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* website noted that the bombing came "in the wake of SLA [Sri Lanka Army] Deep

Penetration Unit attacks, targeting senior LTTE commanders in Vanni". The LTTE also blamed the army for the killing of two of its senior commanders in the Batticaloa and Mannar areas.

The killing of Kulatunga is not an isolated incident but is part of escalating violence following the election of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse last November. Despite its routine denials of any involvement, there is mounting evidence that the Sri Lankan military, along with allied Tamil paramilitaries, has been actively involved in provoking the LTTE through the killing of its cadre and supporters. What was a largely clandestine war has in recent weeks become increasingly open, following the collapse of attempts to reassert the 2002 ceasefire at talks in Oslo.

Rajapakse immediately exploited the assassination to heighten the atmosphere of fear and whip up support for a renewed offensive against the LTTE. "This act of violence... will not frighten either the civilians or the security forces, nor deter them from overcoming the LTTE and its terror," he declared, adding: "These brutal killings should further strengthen all of us in our resolve to defeat the forces of terror and the enemies of democracy, and move toward achieving a just and lasting peace in our country."

Among Sinhala chauvinist layers, the reference to a "just" peace is code for no compromise or concessions to the LTTE. Rajapakse's key political allies are two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which have been demanding that the government tear up the 2002 ceasefire and launch a full-scale assault on the LTTE.

Kulatunga's death has also been used as the pretext for further anti-democratic measures. After a meeting of the National Security Council on Monday chaired by

Rajapakse, the government imposed strict security measures in Colombo and suburbs. Aware that the new security regime will be deeply unpopular, a military spokesman called on the public not to complain about the violation of their rights when security forces check identity cards.

Over the past few months, roadblocks and checkpoints that were dismantled after the 2002 ceasefire have been reestablished at intersections throughout the capital. Now vehicles and people will be subject to the same intolerable checking as during the civil war. Tamils in particular will be the target of harassment and abuse by police and military personnel. The new measures also pave the way for search and cordon operations in the capital, like the pre-dawn sweep in January in which thousands of Tamils were detained.

The 2002 ceasefire agreement, while still formally in place, is hanging by a thread. Both sides were called for talks in Oslo on June 8-9 by Norway, which is the facilitator of the so-called peace process, to discuss the security of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the truce. Amid mutual recriminations, the two delegations failed to even sit down together at the negotiating table.

Now the role of the SLMM is in doubt. The LTTE has called for all European Union (EU) members of the Scandinavian SLMM to be replaced by early August. Last month the EU, under pressure from Washington, listed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. The LTTE, which bitterly criticised the EU decision, insists that EU monitors can no longer be considered neutral. Norway and Iceland, the only non-EU Scandinavian countries, have indicated they are not in a position to fill the vacant posts.

Adding a further obstacle, Rajapakse has objected to the installation of a Norwegian to replace the Swede, Ulf Henricsson, as SLMM head. Just two weeks ago the government and its peace secretariat attacked the SLMM and Henricsson for alleged bias toward the LTTE, after the SLMM released a report providing evidence of the army's collusion in attacks on the LTTE. The JVP and JHU have repeatedly condemned Norway and the ceasefire as "pro-Tiger" and demanded that Norway be replaced as peace facilitator.

Palitha Kohona, head of the government's peace secretariat, has warned Norway that no change can be

made to the SLMM "without our [government's] consent". The government's refusal to compromise amounts to the final blow to the ceasefire agreement. Responding to Rajapakse's stance, LTTE political leader S.P. Thamilchelvan warned on Sunday that "war [is] unavoidable if Norway suspends [its] monitoring function".

The JVP and JHU are openly agitating for war. The JVP's statement following Kulatunga's assassination branded "the murderous tiger terrorism as the main challenge of the Sri Lankan people. The whole nation must be lined up against this terrorist threat."

The JHU called on the Bush administration for direct military assistance as part of its "war on terror". It declared that "the best course of action would be to destroy the terror headquarters [in Sri Lanka] which in turn would pave the way for America's security." The JHU also called for the government to ban the LTTE and reimpose the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which gives the security forces wide powers of detention without trial.

The Indian foreign ministry condemned the suicide bombing and declared that India stood with the Sri Lankan people "in our common struggle against terrorism of which both our countries are victims". While the spokesman appealed for renewed peace negotiations, the Indian government announced on the same day that it was giving sophisticated radar equipment to the Sri Lankan military.

While not openly advocating war, India, like the US, has in recent months become more openly supportive of the Colombo government and more hostile to the LTTE. This shift has been a significant factor in encouraging the Rajapakse government and its chauvinist allies to adopt the more aggressive stance against the LTTE that is plunging the country back to war.



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