

Sri Lankan military directly implicated in two atrocities

Nanda Wickremasinghe**30 June 2006**

An escalating conflict is underway in the war zones of Sri Lanka between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the military, which is working closely with various Tamil paramilitary groups. Hundreds of civilians, LTTE cadre and supporters and military personnel have died since last November when Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidential election.

The media in Colombo and internationally highlights the LTTE's alleged breaches of the tenuous 2002 ceasefire agreement—most obviously, the suicide bombing in late April of army headquarters in central Colombo that nearly claimed the life of army commander, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, and a second suicide attack on Monday that killed Major General Parami Kulatunga, the army's third most senior officer.

However, very little is published about the activities of the Sri Lankan military, which operates as a virtual army of occupation in the North and East of the country, treating the Tamil minority as a whole as its enemy. Since last November, roadblocks and checkpoints have reemerged throughout the island. Soldiers and police routinely use the request for ID as the pretext for harassment and intimidation. The security forces have also reinstated “cordon and search” operations, including in Colombo. Hundreds of people have been arbitrarily rounded up and interrogated in these dragnet operations for “LTTE suspects”.

More sinister is the collusion between the military and allied paramilitaries that have been engaged in the murder and “disappearance” of pro-LTTE politicians, LTTE cadre and Tamils suspected of sympathising with the LTTE. While the security forces have denied any involvement, there is a long history of military intelligence exploiting militias to carry out their dirty work. Moreover, the collaboration has become so open that the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire, provided evidence, including specific instances, in its most recent report.

The security forces are directly implicated in a number of atrocities. In each case, the method of the government and the military is identical: to deny any involvement or to try to foist the blame on the LTTE, no matter how ludicrous the claims. The tactic relies on a compliant media and the knowledge that no serious investigation will be carried out by the police. Two recent cases illustrate the process.

* On Allaipiddy island on May 13, unidentified gunmen broke into the home of S. Amalathas, lobbed a grenade and opened fire on the occupants. Eight people, including a baby and a four-year-

old child, died on the spot. Navy personnel delayed the transport to hospital of three of the injured, one of whom later died. The navy denied any involvement in the attack but gave two widely conflicting accounts of what took place. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella then suggested that the LTTE had killed Tamil civilians to divert international condemnation from its role in a sea battle on May 11.

Two other attacks occurred on the same night on islets close to Kayts Island—Velanai and Puliyanakadu—resulting in four more deaths.

Amnesty International issued a public statement on May 16 condemning the killings and demanding a proper investigation of the incident. While welcoming the government's announcement of an inquiry, the group noted, “that there is a disturbing pattern of incomplete or ineffective investigations, with the result that perpetrators of such violence generally operate with impunity”.

The statement added: “The LTTE has accused the Sri Lankan navy of responsibility for the attacks on Kayts Island, a charge which the navy had denied. However, Amnesty International has received credible reports that Sri Lankan navy personnel and armed cadres affiliated with the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party [EPDP], a Tamil political party that is opposed to the LTTE, were present at the scene of the killings.”

Kayts and neighbouring islets, near the northern part of the Jaffna peninsula, are all under the tight control of the navy and allied EPDP thugs. The EPDP functions as a political party, as well as a paramilitary outfit, and is a longstanding partner in the current ruling coalition government. The government appointed a police team from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) headed by Senior Police Superintendent Mahesh Perera to investigate, but more than a month later no progress has been made.

At a magisterial inquiry on June 6, members of the CID investigation simply failed to appear. A police officer from Jaffna was in court but complained that investigators had been unable to interview witnesses. The local magistrate, Jeyaraman Trotsky, rebuked the police for not calling eyewitness or organising an identification parade. Several locals have stated that they can identify the navy personnel who participated in the attack.

The magistrate publicly asked whether the police were trying to exonerate the navy and ordered the investigators to file a report in 15 days. On June 20, the court reconvened but the CID head and his team failed to appear and no report was presented. Perera

excused his absence due to the “situation on the ground” and lamely stated that his team was unable to speak to witnesses for “security reasons”.

The magistrate again complained that the police were blocking an investigation and threatened to ask the attorney general’s department to take over the inquiry. It is unlikely that the threat will prompt the police to take any action, or that the attorney general’s department, if it took over the case, would conduct any genuine investigation into the murders.

* The second incident took place at the village of Pesalai, on the northwestern island of Mannar. In the early morning of June 17, a naval clash took place off the coast, in which the military claimed to have sunk eight LTTE vessels and killed 25 to 30 LTTE fighters. At 8.20 a.m. on the same day, a hand grenade was lobbed and shots fired into the village church crowded with families seeking refuge. A 70-year-old woman was killed and 47 others injured. Just minutes earlier six fishermen were forced to sit on the beach. Four were shot in the mouth and died on the spot.

Despite reports in the international press citing villagers who blamed the navy, the military immediately denounced the stories as LTTE fabrications and blamed the LTTE for the crime. According to the government’s propaganda, the LTTE were intent on breaking up a developing “healthy relationship” between the occupying security forces and the local Tamil population. No evidence was provided but the Colombo media immediately fell into line.

Local villagers and Catholic Bishop Rayappu Joseph have nevertheless continued to accuse the navy of carrying out the atrocity as part of efforts to intimidate and terrorise the local population. In a lengthy letter to the Vatican, the bishop described the incident in detail and cited eyewitnesses.

According to the letter, the battle between the navy and the LTTE had died down, but locals heard heavy firing from the nearby Siruthoppu navy camp. Naval personnel set fire to the huts of several fishermen who had taken shelter in the church. They found the six fishermen on the beach and shot four dead. The two others tried to run away but were caught and shot. They survived and were taken to Mannar hospital, then later to Anuradahpura hospital.

Having murdered the fishermen on the beach, the naval troops moved to the church. Four were in shorts and t-shirts and another three were in camouflage uniforms. They stormed into the church compound, riding motorcycles, and started firing at the church walls, doors and windows where hundreds of people were sheltering. The men fired into the church then opened one of the windows and hurled two grenades inside.

In his letter, the bishop declared that local military commander advised him not to visit the area. “After much effort, the Divisional Secretary and myself were able to send the Mannar police with ambulances to bring the seriously wounded to the Mannar hospital.” At about 9.10 a.m. the bishop was able to move towards Pesalai with officials from the SLMM, the Red Cross and the Divisional Secretary.

“In the meantime, the military sources had tried to spread false news stating that there had been an attack by the LTTE on land at Pesalai on the police and the navy had to open fire etc. They also

had been stating that a grenade held by one of those inside the Church had exploded etc., and that the security forces are not responsible for the explosion in the Church. All the people of Pesalai say that there was absolutely no incident on land in their village on that morning and the grenade story as stated by the military sources is adding insult to injury,” he stated.

The bishop invited the navy commander to a meeting of 7,000 people that evening. “These people related to him in the above terms, of the inhuman incident perpetrated by the SL Navy in their village of Pesalai. They cried for their security against the Security Forces. They wanted him not to prevent them from fleeing to India or to go to the LTTE-controlled Wanni for their safety. If not, they said, he could bring all his men and shoot all of them once and for all. Even if a sacred place like a church is unsafe for them, where else will the innocent civilians find safety? That was their question.”

The bishop referred to a similar incident in Pesalai on December 23, in which navy personnel were involved in the disappearance of four civilians, including a three-year-old child, following a claymore mine attack on the navy. At the time, the navy threatened to wipe out the whole village if any further LTTE attack took place on the navy.

In the face of mounting evidence and international publicity, President Rajapakse called a national security meeting and appointed a presidential committee to investigate the incident. The committee is comprised of top military officers. He also instructed the armed forces chiefs to protect civilians from military attacks. While the investigation will no doubt be more high profile than the CID inquiry on Kayts Island, the result will inevitably be the same: to exonerate the military, in one way or another.

Such atrocities are not aberrations, but are the inevitable product of a racialist war waged for more than two decades by the Sri Lankan ruling class to maintain its rule by dividing working people along communal lines.



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