Fierce fighting escalates in Sri Lanka

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For the first time since the signing of a ceasefire in 2002, Sri Lankan soldiers and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters have been engaged in open battle over the last two days. While reports of casualties vary widely, fierce fighting has claimed scores of lives and left many more wounded.

After four days of aerial attacks on LTTE positions, the military launched a ground offensive on Sunday involving 3,000 troops to seize control of the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate, which lies within LTTE territory near the eastern port of Trincomalee. The government has accused the LTTE of closing the gate, cutting off water to thousands of small farmers in surrounding areas.

Despite government claims that the operation would be strictly limited and over in 24 hours, the military has failed to take control of the sluice gate. Under conditions of heavy military censorship, reports of the bitter fighting have been limited and biased. Nevertheless the army conceded that it lost 27 soldiers on Monday and claimed to have killed 39 rebels—claims that the LTTE has denied.

The conflict is rapidly spreading as the army has sought to reinforce its offensive. On Monday evening, the LTTE detonated a mine blowing up a bus transporting troops in the area. The military has acknowledged that at least 15 soldiers and a civilian driver died in the attack, which injured many more.

The battle continued yesterday as the military used artillery, multi-barrel rocket launchers and Israeli-built Kfir warplanes to bombard and strafe LTTE positions. The army claims to have fought its way to within a kilometre of the sluice gate.

Military spokesman, Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told the state-owned *Daily News*: “Initially it was the mine fields that slowed the advance of the ground troops towards the anicut [sluice gate]. Now the mortar fire by the LTTE using 81mm and 120mm mortars is impeding the advancing the troops’ progress.”

In one of the few first-hand reports, published in today’s *Daily Mirror*, a wounded soldier described the situation. He said that a “Tiger” force of about 200 was tenaciously hanging on near the sluice gate. He had seen “around 40 bodies of dead LTTE cadres” strewn around the area. The military was being repeatedly harassed by other LTTE fighters. He said that “the group suddenly appeared, fired at oncoming troops and then dropped out of sight.”

Clashes also took place elsewhere. Yesterday Jetliner, a passenger ferry being used to bring more than 850 troops from the northern Jaffna peninsula to Trincomalee, came under artillery and mortar fire from LTTE positions in Sampoor directly opposite the port facilities. While Jetliner docked safely, four sailors were killed and another 30 were wounded in the barrage. The military retaliated by strafing the Sampoor area.

Fear of all-out war has caused a growing stream of refugees to flee the Trincomalee district. “They are carrying their belongings away, but there is no real place for them to go,” an unnamed source told the BBC. “The fighting is 20 kilometres away, but everyone fears that violence will spread towards the town. All the offices are closed now and people don’t really know what is happening. There is a war out there, there is fighting. It is very heavy and I feel that the casualties will be high.”

Contradictory media reports have appeared of other naval clashes. The LTTE claimed to have sunk one of the navy’s fast attack vessels yesterday but the military immediately denied the report. Defence spokesmen insisted that the navy had sunk at least three of the LTTE’s small gunboats and damaged others in the Trincomalee area.

The rapid expansion of the conflict gives the lie to government claims that it is carrying out a limited, “humanitarian” operation to open the Mavilaru sluice gate to provide water for local farmers. The military have exploited the issue as the pretext for launching an offensive to seize LTTE territory, in clear breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, as well as to bomb LTTE positions that are nowhere near Mavilaru.

On Saturday, the air force bombed an LTTE conference hall at Karadiyanaru, 24 kilometres northwest of Batticaloa. On Monday, military announced that its warplanes have attacked the LTTE naval base at Vakarai, killing at least 30 LTTE members.

According to the LTTE, the government was never interested in resolving the water issue, which erupted after the Colombo government a month ago shelved longstanding plans to build a reservoir in the Mavilaru area. Locals protested by closing the sluice gate and issued a series of demands. The Norwegian-led Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire, was due to meet with the LTTE and local farmers on

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July 27 to discuss a solution, but the government ordered the bombing campaign to begin on the previous evening.

Speaking in Colombo on Monday, SLMM head Major Ulf Henricsson publicly questioned the government's "humanitarian aims", declaring: "The Ilakkantai Sea Tiger base was not bombed for water." He also pointed out that the offensive to take the Mavilaru sluice gate could well be counterproductive if the LTTE decides to blow up the reservoir. He characterised the offensive as "overkill" and the wrong method to get water, if that was the issue.

Speaking to the *Hindustan Times*, a Western diplomat was similarly sceptical. "If water was the issue and the dam had to be taken, the best way would have been to send copter-borne commandoes to secure that place in one swift operation and get out," he said.

The SLMM is in an increasingly awkward position. The government has not withdrawn from the ceasefire agreement and continues to insist that it abides by the terms. Yet over the past nine months since Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidency, the military and its allied anti-LTTE paramilitaries have waged a covert war to provoke and undermine the LTTE. The current military offensive is setting the stage for a return to all-out civil war.

Henricsson pessimistically told the press on Monday: "In reality, there is no ceasefire but on paper it is still there. At the moment none of the parties are interested in talks... a full-scale war will be a disaster."

Significantly, the military offensive in Sri Lanka has been met with silence internationally. Despite their claims to support a continuing truce and a negotiated peace in Sri Lanka, the US, India, the European powers and Japan have not issued a word of criticism, let alone condemnation of the actions of the Rajapakse government.

The US has effectively given the green light in recent months for the Rajapakse government to adopt an aggressive stance against the LTTE. The Bush administration backed the ceasefire in 2002 and the subsequent peace talks not out of concern for the Sri Lankan people but to end a conflict that threatened US economic and strategic interests in the Indian subcontinent. After the peace talks failed in 2003, and particularly after the election of Rajapakse last November, Washington has tacitly supported the escalation of military action against the LTTE to crush it or force it to capitulate.

The Bush administration has waged an international diplomatic campaign to pressure Canada and the European Union to ban the LTTE as a "terrorist organisation". These moves were a heavy blow to the LTTE, which relies on financial and political support among the Tamil diaspora around the world.

The decision directly undermined efforts by Norway to resurrect the ceasefire agreement as the LTTE insisted that EU members of the SLMM—Finland, Sweden and Denmark—had to be replaced by non-EU personnel. Last week Finland and Denmark announced that their decision to pull out, with Sweden following suit this week, leaving just Norway and Iceland to hold together a depleted mission to monitor an increasingly meaningless ceasefire.

As fighting escalated on Sunday, S. Elilan, a senior LTTE leader in Trincomalee, told the media that the ceasefire agreement had become "null and void". "The war is on and we are ready. The war has begun. It is the government which has started the war," he said. The following day, however, he softened his statement, saying that any decision to pull out of the ceasefire agreement would have to made by the LTTE leadership based in the northern town of Kilinochchi.

The LTTE is caught in a bind. It agreed to the ceasefire in 2002 and formally renounced its longstanding demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam, hoping to reach a powersharing deal with the Colombo government. After negotiations fell apart in 2003 without any discussion of such an agreement, the LTTE repeatedly appealed to the "international community" to push the government back to talks. It has become more and more evident, however, that the US and major powers are insisting on nothing short of the LTTE's complete capitulation before any renewal of negotiations.

The Rajapakse government's provocative military moves over the last nine months are being driven by a growing economic and social crisis for which it has no answer but to whip up communal hatred and plunge the country back to a civil war that has already claimed 65,000 lives. The offensive in the east of the island is being accompanied by a frenzied campaign by Rajapakse's Sinhala chauvinist allies—Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—and in the print and electronic media to justify the military aggression as a "humanitarian mission" to provide water to thousands of poor farmers.

The return to war is not aimed simply at the LTTE and the Tamil masses but against working people as a whole. The same government that is professing concern for the farmers in the Trincomalee district has done nothing to alleviate the extreme poverty rampant in rural areas. Just three weeks ago, sections of the media were denouncing port and petroleum workers as more damaging than the "LTTE terrorists" and demanding that the government take tough measures to end any industrial action. War will inevitably be accompanied by further demands for workers and the poor to sacrifice for the "defence of the nation".

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