

Fighting in eastern Sri Lanka spreads to the town of Muttur

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Fighting is intensifying between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As the government calculated from the outset, the army's provocative attempt to seize the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate is leading to a broader war for control of the eastern province as the LTTE retaliates against the offensive and seeks to block supply lines.

The army has failed so far to capture the sluice gate, despite throwing thousands of soldiers into the operation and repeatedly bombing LTTE positions since July 26. Over the past two days, a battle has been raging for control of the town of Muttur, which lies on the road between the major port of Trincomalee to the north and the Mavilaru sluice gate to the south.

While media reports are limited, it appears that at least 200 LTTE fighters entered the government-held town on Wednesday and fought their way to the town centre. While the military has denied that the LTTE has control of Muttur, its denial was only issued 36 hours later and the situation remains unclear.

Abdul Rauf told the BBC Tamil service on Wednesday that hundreds of LTTE cadres could be seen in all parts of Muttur. He said army troops had retreated to camps located at the four corners of the town, which were under LTTE siege. Other eyewitnesses told the press that the LTTE had seized the Muttur jetty, making it difficult for the military to bring up reinforcements.

The Colombo-based *Daily Mirror* quoted the defence ministry as saying that "police posts located in the central bus depot, telecommunication department and the town centre were vacated due to Tiger attacks". In plain language, the police deserted their posts without putting up any resistance.

In desperation, the military began to indiscriminately shell the town in a bid to retake control. As the shelling

from the Trincomalee naval base intensified, civilians in Muttur fled their homes to take refuge in churches, mosques and schools.

Even though these places were clearly marked as refugee centres, several have been hit. An artillery shell struck the Arabic College where hundreds of Muslim men, women and children were sheltering. At least ten were killed and scores were injured. Mortar fire also hit St. Anthony's church, killing an eight-year-old boy. An ambulance ferrying the injured to a nearby hospital was attacked—two people died on the spot and the driver later succumbed to his injuries.

J.H. Faris, a public servant from Muttur, told Reuters: "Most of the houses are damaged. There is no electricity or water. There are dead cattle in the streets. The people at the mosque told us to go to the Muslim College to be safe. We were outside when the shell fell." His son was wounded in the attack.

Government and military representatives have attempted to blame the shelling on the LTTE. However, Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem yesterday accused the military of firing shells on schools and other refugee centres in Muttur, which has a predominantly Muslim population. Hakeem, who is hostile to the LTTE, said: "The government must take responsibility for the killing of civilians... The people were killed in attacks carried out by the security forces." He called for an immediate end to the hostilities.

Between 15 and 20 civilians have died in the clashes in Muttur over the last two days. Military casualties are unclear. The LTTE claimed yesterday to have killed 40 soldiers and announced it was prepared to hand over the bodies. The military dismissed the claims, saying it has killed more than 70 rebels over the past week for the loss of only a few soldiers. Media estimates put the

total number of dead since the government launched its offensive at more than 150.

Despite the efforts of the Colombo media, the government and the military to paint as bright a picture as possible, it is clear that the offensive is not going as planned. Having failed to immediately take the Mavilaru sluice gate, the army now confronts concerted LTTE counterattacks on its positions elsewhere. The shelling of civilians in Muttur is a sharp warning that, far from backing off, the government intends to press on regardless of the devastating consequences.

Despite his claims to be a man of peace, President Mahinda Rajapakse has been pursuing a policy of war ever since he narrowly won last November's election with the backing of the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). The army and allied anti-LTTE paramilitaries, such as the Karuna group, have been engaged in a campaign of provocations and murders aimed at weakening the LTTE and goading it into retaliating.

For months the JVP, JHU and other Sinhala extremists have been pressing the government to launch a military offensive against the LTTE, particularly in the eastern province. These communalist layers, who are adamantly opposed to any renewal of peace talks, have insisted that the army take advantage of the weakening of the LTTE in the east, following the breakaway of the Karuna group in 2004.

The closing of the Mavilaru sluice gate simply provided a convenient pretext for the military to pursue this long-discussed strategy. From the outset, the LTTE insisted that local farmers had closed the gate to protest their grievances over the government's broken promises and that the issue should be settled through negotiation. Rajapakse rejected any talks and ordered the military to undertake an urgent "humanitarian" mission to provide water to thousands of farmers downstream.

In a back flip yesterday, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared that the door was open to a negotiated settlement to the Mavilaru crisis. He said the military would withdraw from the area as long as the LTTE opened the sluice gate without any conditions attached. "If the Tigers are ready, we are ready too to start talks immediately," he declared. "[W]e do not want to go back to war."

No one should place any credence in these cynical comments. More than a week and 150 deaths after Rajapakse ordered an offensive to retake the sluice gate, the government's representative now announces that it does not want war and the matter can be solved by negotiation. One obvious reason for this abrupt change of heart is the arrival in Colombo today of Norwegian envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer in an effort to end the fighting. Rambukwella's remarks are a crude attempt to pin the blame for the current conflict on the LTTE.

As farmers and the rural poor throughout Sri Lanka know only too well, the Rajapakse government has not the slightest interest in their well-being. A recent Census and Statistic Department report found that the average income in the districts of Matara, Matale, Hambantota, Kurunegala, Badulla and Monragala is below the official poverty line of about \$US21 a month. It is to divert attention from this deepening social crisis that the government is stirring up communal tensions and plunging the country back to war.

The attitude of the Rajapakse government is revealed more clearly in the statements of its Sinhala chauvinist allies. Addressing a public rally on Wednesday, JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa praised the use of military power to seize the Mavilaru sluice and denounced comments this week by Norway's top facilitator Erik Solheim, who called for an end to offensive operations and a return to the status quo established by the 2002 ceasefire. Pushing for all-out war against the LTTE, Weerawansa declared that the ceasefire agreement was a dead letter and called for the government to formally withdraw from it.



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