# Sri Lankan military attacks drive thousands from Muttur

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Thousands of people are fleeing Muttur in eastern Sri Lanka, amid a continuing battle for control between the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The town has been devastated by artillery, mortar and air strikes since LTTE fighters entered it on Wednesday and forced government security forces to retreat to their camps.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) estimates that 20,000 to 30,000 people have fled from the predominantly Muslim town due to the lack of food and water, and continued shelling. A bank worker in the nearby port of Trincomalee told the WSWS by phone last night that the ICRC had sent 50 lorries of relief supplies to Muttur, but had been blocked by the military at Kantalai just to the south of the town.

The LTTE attacked the government-held town in a bid to cut army supply lines between Trincomalee and troops further south seeking to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate. President Mahinda Rajapakse ordered an offensive on July 26, accusing the LTTE of closing the sluice and cutting off water to thousands of farmers downstream. The military operation is the first attempt to seize LTTE territory since the two sides signed a ceasefire agreement in 2002.

Well aware of widespread public fear and opposition to a return to war, the government and military, with the assistance of a compliant media in Colombo, are playing down the extent of the fighting. Yesterday Rajapakse told an all-party conference in the capital that the security forces had defeated the LTTE in Muttur and repeated his hollow declaration that "we are committed to peace". He was cheered on by his Sinhala chauvinist allies—Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—who praised the government's decision to launch a military offensive.

Even the limited military briefings, which exaggerate LTTE casualties, reveal that fierce fighting is taking place. The defence ministry reported yesterday that "a wave of Kfir jets flew over eastern seas" to bomb an LTTE sea base inflicting heavy losses. It also maintained that more than 100 LTTE fighters had been killed in an attempt to take control of the jetty at Muttur on Friday.

The WSWS spoke to a Muttur resident yesterday who described the chaotic situation and accused the military of killing civilians by shelling the area. He had accompanied several injured residents who had managed to get out of the town and were taken to Colombo for medical treatment.

He blamed the government for restarting the war. "The closure of the Marvilaru anicut [sluice gate] could have settled through negotiations. But [last week's] protest march by the Jathika Hela Uramaya made things worse. It gave a push to elements of the military that are working against peace. The government started the aerial bombing and shelling of locations supposedly held by the LTTE. And fierce fighting started as troops moved toward LTTE-controlled areas."

He explained that the LTTE had entered Muttur from the adjoining LTTE-controlled area of Sampur, which has already been repeatedly shelled by the army and navy. Thousands of Tamils have been displaced from Sampur. He surmised that the LTTE must have overrun the Kattaparichan military camp, which is the entry point from Sampur into the area around Muttur.

"In Muttur, near the Peoples Bank and the Bank of Ceylon, there was a police post with about 10 to 12 officers. When the LTTE entered the town, the police withdrew. Now the banks are closed. After the LTTE entered Muttur, the navy started indiscriminate attacks using multi-barrel rocket launchers from the Trincomalee naval base.

"They [the military] say they are targeting the LTTE but it is the civilians who are caught up in this fighting. There are hundreds of wounded people. Now these people are

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not in a position to move out. There is no ferry service, no bus service and no way to get out.

"Even the wounded who tried to escape via Kantalai have been blocked by security forces. Some of the injured got out on small boats and have been admitted to Trincomalee hospital. I came that way. After one or two days, people in Muttur will have no food. The government may say that they are sending food but this is all lies. How is it going to reach the area when all entry to Muttur is closed off?

"Yesterday [Thursday] the special forces landed on Muttur jetty. It is said that they are planning to enter Muttur to relieve soldiers in bunkers at the Kattaparichan camp. The navy is using its multi-barrel rocket launchers from its Trincomalee base. The air force is also bombing.

"I don't know how many people are going to die because of this. In Muttur, there are no multi-storey buildings. All the houses are small. So there is no safe place for people to take shelter. The government says it started the attack to provide water to 15,000 people. But how many will now die and be injured? Tens of thousands have already been displaced."

He disputed the government's attempts to blame the LTTE for the shelling of two schools in Muttur on Thursday, which killed at least 17 civilians. "Why would the LTTE shell Muttur? They were already there. I am a Muslim and I do not agree with the LTTE's policies. However, by accusing the LTTE of killing people at the Arabic college and the Thopur school, the military is trying to instigate communal violence between Tamils and Muslims."

A bank worker in Trincomalee, who spoke to the WSWS on Thursday and Friday, explained that the situation was very tense. "I live in the town area. We cannot bear the sound of bombing from the naval base. How can the people of Muttur bear the bombs falling on them? There is no bus service through Kantalai to Trincomalee now, and no ferry service. People have to use the Kinniya sea route to get out. It is too risky, as the navy may attack them.

"Since the LTTE's attack on the Trincomalee naval base on Monday, all shops and offices have closed in the port by noon [for the rest of the day]. People don't sleep at night because of the fear. Since the attack on the naval base, there have been fewer security forces in the town. The [identity] checking process has been reduced. I think that the security forces have been shifted to military operations."

Yesterday, shops and government offices in Trincomalee were shut by a hartal [a general strike and business closure] to protest against the indiscriminate attacks by security forces on Muttur. Transport services were paralysed. Demonstrators demanded an end to the bombing and the removal of the recently appointed district secretary, a retired army officer.

The widespread anger over the military's attacks on Muttur has compelled the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakim to repeat his accusation that government forces were responsible for the deaths of at least 30 civilians in Muttur. Hakim is politically hostile to the LTTE and until recently was considering joining the Rajapakse government.

The military denounced his initial remarks as "irresponsible", "arbitrary" and "unverified". But Hakim repeated the accusation at a press conference yesterday, saying: "We may seem to be making an anti-government statement. But we have to go by what the local people tell us, and they say that most of the shells came from the direction of the army camps in the vicinity."

Hakim said he had complained to presidential advisor Basil Rajapakse and to the chief of defence staff, Air Vice Marshal Donald Perera. "They promised to stop the shelling. But the promise was not kept," he stated, adding that another five refugees had been killed on Friday morning while attempting to flee. Hakim accused the military of hindering supplies, confirming that a Red Cross convoy had been blocked at Kantalai.

Not surprisingly, the Colombo press has virtually ignored Hakim's remarks except insofar as he has criticised the LTTE for detaining some Muslims. Throughout the past nine months, the media has functioned as a compliant mouthpiece for the Rajapakse government as it has stirred up communal hatred and pursued a policy of plunging the country back to civil war to divert attention from the country's deepening economic and social crisis. The ruthless bombardment of Muttur is a warning that even bigger war crimes are being prepared.

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