

Sri Lankan government intensifies military offensive against LTTE

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Despite the opening of the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate on Tuesday, the Sri Lankan military has intensified its offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the eastern province, making clear that the government has no intention of upholding the 2002 ceasefire.

President Mahinda Rajapakse ordered the “limited” military operation on July 26, claiming that it was necessary on “humanitarian grounds” to reopen the sluice gate to provide water to thousands of farmers downstream. The “water issue”, however, was simply a pretext for a military offensive aimed at capturing LTTE territory and weakening its hold throughout the East.

Over the past three weeks, the military has seized the opportunity provided by the LTTE’s closure of the sluice gate to bomb LTTE installations that are nowhere near the disputed area. Last Sunday, the LTTE, after discussion with Norwegian peace facilitators, offered to open the gate but the government rejected the proposal. Military shelling prevented representatives of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) accompanying the LTTE to release water.

On Tuesday, the LTTE announced that it had opened the gate for humanitarian reasons. Later that evening, the government disputed the claim and insisted that the release of water was “to the credit of military”. By Wednesday, whoever was responsible, water was flowing to farmers in the Serunuwara area.

SLMM officials expressed the hope that the opening of the gate would ease tensions, but the opposite has been the case. Some of the fiercest fighting has taken place in the Mavilaru area over the past two days as the military attempts to secure control of the gate. The seizure of the LTTE territory is an open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement.

With water now flowing, the government’s pretext for the military offensive has shifted. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared: “Our concern is that control of the water should be under the government. If it is under the terrorists, as and when they want they can open and close it. We don’t want any interruption in the water, and therefore the forces are in and around and will be taking control.”

The *Daily Mirror* reported today: “Military sources said that six soldiers were killed and nearly 50 injured. The injured were evacuated to Kantale and Polonnaruwa hospitals. Some soldiers were evacuated to Colombo due to their critical condition.” A local hospital chief, D.G.M. Costa, told the AFP news agency that his staff were treating the heaviest number of casualties yet in the three-week-old conflict.

The LTTE has announced that seven of its fighters are dead, while claiming to have killed 45 soldiers and wounded another 120. It also accused the security forces of shelling and strafing civilian areas, with 50 dead and 200 injured. The military did not deny the claim, but accused the LTTE of “moving guns into populated areas”. Like the Israelis in Lebanon or the US in Iraq, the Sri Lankan army is using the “human shields” excuse to justify the murder of innocent civilians.

The air force has continued its bombing of LTTE targets far removed from Mavilaru. On Wednesday, Israeli-built Kfir jets strafed Sampur, Muttur east and Verugal. According to the LTTE, five people were killed in the Verugal air raids. Yesterday further strafing took place in the same areas. These continuing attacks underscore the government’s aim—to dislodge the LTTE from key strategic positions throughout the East.

While President Rajapakse continues to insist that he

is not waging an aggressive war, his key political ally—the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—openly calls on the government to tear up the ceasefire and destroy the LTTE militarily. In a statement to parliament on Tuesday, JVP spokesman Wimal Weerawansa called on the military to eliminate the LTTE from the Sampur area, saying its presence constituted a threat to key military installations around Trincomalee harbour.

Weerawansa’s comments reflect the sentiments of sections of the military that have been pressing for a full-scale offensive against the LTTE in the East ever since a major split in the LTTE’s ranks in 2004. The breakaway Karuna group has been covertly operating alongside the army in provocative attacks on the LTTE for the past nine months. The LTTE positions in the Sampur region have been repeatedly identified as a prime objective. Trincomalee is the major deep-water port on the eastern coast and an essential link in supplying troops on the northern Jaffna peninsula.

The war is already spreading. Last week the LTTE seized control of parts of the town of Muttur in a bid to cut the army’s supply lines to the Mavilaru area. The military responded with a devastating aerial and artillery assault that killed scores of civilians and drove as many as 40,000 people from their homes. Many of the refugees are sheltering in cramped conditions in Kantalai without adequate food, accommodation or medical assistance.

On Tuesday, a car bomb rocked the capital of Colombo. It appears that the LTTE was targeting Sankarapillai Sivathanan, an official of the Eelam People’s Democratic Party—a Tamil paramilitary organisation allied to the government and the military. Sivathanan escaped serious injury, but two others, including a three-year-old child, were killed. Another eight were injured.

In 2002, when the ceasefire was signed, the major powers, as well as significant sections of the corporate elite in Colombo, backed the peace process as a means of ending the 20-year war that had become a barrier to their economic interests in Sri Lanka and throughout the Indian subcontinent. Four years later, the silence of the “international community”—the Bush administration in particular—is a clear demonstration that the major powers are tacitly supporting the Rajapakse government’s military offensive.

Within Colombo, the entire political and media establishment has fallen in behind the war drive. Not only the open advocates of war such as the JVP but also what passes for the “liberal” opposition in Sri Lanka ruling circles has joined the chorus of militarism and communalism. The editorial in yesterday’s *Daily Mirror* is a striking example of the latter. The newspaper, which over the past four years has championed the “peace process,” began by commending the military for its recent operations.

While plaintively calling for peace talks, the editorial urged the government to learn the lessons of Lebanon, declaring: “The human tragedy that Israel’s incursion into Lebanon to eliminate Hezbollah terrorism is today causing grave concern globally. The military might of Israel has so far failed to achieve the objective. The network of terrorism is so widely spread in this country today that when their acts are dealt with at one place their misdeeds are perpetrated at another.

“Therefore, if the government chooses to pursue an aggressive policy it has to be properly equipped do so and the support of the widest possible sections of people has to be obtained. It is indeed the duty of all concerned to lend their support to such a course of action if there are no other avenues of achieving the objective.” Far from opposing the war, as it might previously have done, the *Daily Mirror* is openly supporting a return to military conflict.

The ruling elites are closing ranks behind a renewed drive to war in the midst of a deepening social and economic crisis. As on every other occasion since independence in 1948, the ruling class is responding to growing opposition over deteriorating living standards by whipping up communal sentiment in order to divide the working class. Inevitably it will be working people who will be compelled to sacrifice for a fratricidal war that has already cost the lives of 65,000 people.



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