

War spreads to the north of Sri Lanka

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Fighting between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) intensified and expanded over the weekend to the northern Jaffna peninsula, claiming as many as 200 lives. While neither side has formally withdrawn from the 2002 ceasefire, the agreement is effectively a dead letter. The island is rapidly sliding back into full-scale civil war.

The LTTE launched a coordinated offensive last Friday on key military positions, including an artillery barrage on the Palaly airbase on the north of the Jaffna peninsula. The facility is a crucial lifeline for security forces stationed in the area as road links to the south of the island run through LTTE-controlled territory and have now all been closed.

A military Bell 212 helicopter as well as parts of the runway were damaged, forcing a suspension of all military and commercial flights. The Security Forces Head Quarters, situated in the same complex, came under LTTE long-range artillery fire from a distance of about 30 kilometres. The army has been compelled to rely on military helicopters to ferry in commandos to reinforce its ground forces.

The LTTE also advanced northward from Elephant Pass—a key strategic position that acts as the gateway to the Jaffna peninsula and was captured by the LTTE in 2000. LTTE fighters overran a number of the army's forward bunkers. Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) representative Robban Nilsson told Reuters: "Ten bunkers of the Sri Lankan Army were taken but five of them were retaken by the security forces... They [the LTTE] are still 500 metres inside the [army] forward defence lines."

On Saturday morning the LTTE also shelled the eastern port of Trincomalee—a major naval base and crucial link in shipping troops and military supplies to Jaffna. In 2000, the Sri Lankan military confronted a disaster when tens of thousands of troops were cut off and confronted a concerted LTTE offensive up the Jaffna peninsula. Only the intervention of India and the major powers pressured the LTTE to halt its drive and prevented a major debacle for the military.

The military claimed to have thwarted an LTTE sea-borne attack on positions near Jaffna town. Military spokesman Brigadier Athula Jayawardena said helicopter gunships had attacked a number of LTTE craft in the early hours of Sunday. He said troops were still hunting a group of LTTE fighters who infiltrated Kayts Island on Friday.

Estimates of the number of dead in two days of fighting vary widely. The military has admitted that 36 of its personnel are dead and at least 80 injured, while claiming to have killed 150 rebels. The LTTE has acknowledged the deaths of 22 of its fighters.

President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government have cynically blamed the LTTE for the latest round of fighting. Government spokesman Nimal Siripala De Silva told the state-owned newspaper *Silumina* on Sunday: "The government has emphasised that the military steps taken are to safeguard the rights of the masses and secure national defence, which constitutes no violation of the cease-fire agreement."

In reality, the escalating conflict is a direct product of a series of provocative attacks on the LTTE by the military and allied paramilitaries following Rajapakse's narrow election win last November. The current fighting is a direct consequence of the president's decision to order an offensive on July 26 to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate on "humanitarian grounds" to provide water to farmers downstream. Even though the LTTE opened the sluice gate last week, the military has continued its operation to seize LTTE territory—a clear breach of the ceasefire.

The army's operations have not been limited to the area around Mavilaru. The military used the offensive as the pretext to bombard a number of key LTTE positions, including the Sampur area south of the port of Trincomalee. Yesterday, the LTTE accused Special Task Force police of attempting to overrun one of its camps near the eastern town of Batticaloa. The military top brass has long sought to take advantage of a debilitating split in the LTTE's ranks in 2004 that led to the formation of the

breakaway Karuna group. Not surprisingly, the LTTE has retaliated by attacking the army's weak points on the Jaffna peninsula.

SLMM head Ulf Henricsson has told today's *Daily Mirror* that he has recommended that the Norwegian-led ceasefire monitors leave the country unless both sides end the fighting immediately. "I recommended to Norway, to consider withdrawing the mission because, I can't see the need for it to function, if it is not used by the parties. So, why should we be here and sometimes, risk lives, when the parties don't want us? They just want us as a political cover," he said.

Henricsson said he had ruled that the government's offensive to take the Mavilaru sluice gate was an "offensive" not a "humanitarian" or defensive operation. "They talk about humanitarian operations or defensive airstrikes... I rule it as military offensive operations... Of course, you are fighting your enemy and the government feels the whole operation right now is defensive. But that is not my view on it, at least not according to the CFA [ceasefire agreement]," he said.

In the midst of the current fighting, Palitha Kohona, head of the government's peace secretariat, claimed to have received an offer from the LTTE to hold negotiations. Kohona immediately embraced the proposal—a move that tends to indicate that the military offensive is not proceeding as planned. S. Puleedevan, head of the LTTE peace secretariat, immediately denied the statement, saying: "We have made no proposal for peace talks. The government's offensive attacks make peace talks impossible."

With the conflict escalating and no prospect of a truce in sight, the US embassy in Colombo finally issued a statement last Friday calling for an end to fighting and renewed negotiations. The comments were the first since the government launched its offensive over two weeks ago and indicate a concern in Washington that the Sri Lankan military is facing difficulties. The previous silence amounted to a virtual green light from the Bush administration for the Rajapakse government's operations.

The following day, the co-chairs of the peace process—the US, the European Union, Japan and Norway—issued their first formal declaration since the eruption of open conflict. Having sat silent while scores of people have been killed and tens of thousands driven from their homes, the co-chairs hypocritically expressed deep concern about the fighting and urged an immediate return to the negotiating table.

A concerted international intervention is unlikely, however. A Western diplomat told Reuters over the weekend: "I think we are inclined to sit back and let them [the government and the LTTE] take it on the chin for a while". SLMM spokesman Thorfinnur Omarsson expressed similar sentiments, saying: "It is useless [to try to stop the fighting] if there is no initiative from the parties... And both parties have shown no initiative."

Civilians in the North and East of the island are confronting a deepening social catastrophe.

According to the International Red Cross, thousands of refugees are trapped behind LTTE lines to the north of Batticaloa. There are estimated to be another 40,000 refugees in the government-controlled areas in the East after residents fled fierce fighting for control of the town of Muttur.

Before the fighting on the Jaffna peninsula, the LTTE broadcast a message on Friday urging civilians to move away from army posts in the Thenmaradchchi, Eluthumadduval, Pulo-pallai, Kilali, Kodikamam, Kachchai and Varani areas. The security forces, however, prevented an exodus by imposing a curfew that evening. Shops were ordered to close and people ordered to stay indoors. Security forces threatened to shoot those trying to flee.

As a result, many residents were caught in the ensuing crossfire. In recent weeks, the military has tried to justify its savage ground and air assaults, which have killed scores of innocent people, by accusing the LTTE of using civilians as "human shields". In the case of the Jaffna peninsula, it appears that the security forces consciously prevented the local Tamil population from leaving to try to blunt an impending LTTE offensive. As far as the government and the military are concerned, the island's entire Tamil minority is the enemy and is treated accordingly.



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