

On-the-spot report from Sri Lanka's war-torn Jaffna peninsula

Our correspondents
18 August 2006

Fierce clashes between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been taking place over the past week on the northern Jaffna peninsula. Little of what has been taking place has been reported in the Colombo media, which relies almost entirely on military and government briefings, or the international press, which has few correspondents on the spot.

The extent of the fighting and the number of casualties is unclear. According to military spokesman Major Upali Rajapakse, 106 soldiers and at least 700 LTTE fighters have been killed over the last week. Yesterday he claimed another victory for the security forces in repelling LTTE attacks at Kilali on Wednesday. Such claims are routinely denied by the LTTE.

Government authorities have immediately imposed harsh measures over the area. Blanket curfews have been added to the regime of checkpoints, searches and identity checks used by security forces to harass and intimidate the local Tamil population. In some parts of the peninsula, the curfew has only been lifted for one or two hours since Monday. On Thursday, the curfew throughout government-controlled areas was in place for all but four hours.

Food shortages are developing. Basic items such as rice, flour, meat, fish and fruit are scarce. The government agent in Jaffna, K. Ganesh, has called on the government to send 5,000 metric tonnes of basic food items to the district immediately. Road links to the south, however, have been cut due by the fighting and any supplies have to be brought by sea or air.

The deepening social crisis is being compounded by a growing flood of refugees. As in previous fighting in the eastern areas of the island, the military is indiscriminately using air strikes, multi-barrel rockets launchers and artillery, causing civilian deaths and the displacement of thousands of people. The UN High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 135,000 people have been displaced by the current fighting.

Queues as long as 300 metres have been reported in front of chemist shops. There is no electricity on the Jaffna peninsula and no fuel. Few telephones are operating.

WSWS correspondents in Jaffna made the following report after queuing for several hours to use a phone at a private home—a practice that has become common. The report is brief because the time allowed for the call was limited but it provides an insight into what is facing people throughout the area.

The LTTE attacks on the military in Jaffna started on August 11 at about 7 p.m. at various points, including Muhamalai, Nagarkovil, Mandathivu and Allaipiddy.

Allaipiddy is a small island under the control of the Sri Lankan navy about seven kilometres from Jaffna town. As the clash between the LTTE and security forces began, local residents sought refuge in the St. Phillip Nary church. The LTTE captured Allaipiddy, forcing government soldiers to retreat several kilometres.

Early the following morning, shells fell in front of the church killing four people on the spot and injuring many more. Others have been killed elsewhere on the island by the artillery barrage. The military was firing from the Palaly military complex, about 20 kilometres away, in bid to recapture Allaipiddy. The LTTE finally withdrew and the navy returned.

About 213 families, or more than 750 people, arrived at St. Mary's church on neighbouring Kayts Island. There are 66 children under the age of five and 38 children under the age of two. People fled because they feared further attacks on Allaipiddy.

According to the refugees, at least 74 people were seriously injured in the clashes—57 are in Jaffna teaching hospital and 17 in Kayts hospital. Before reaching the church, most people had been hiding out without food or

water since Sunday night. The navy had prevented people from Mankumban village from leaving Allaipiddy. A few managed to reach Jaffna.

Government authorities are providing no food or supplies to the refugees at the church. They rely on food and other assistance from local villagers. Fishermen's societies and cooperative organisations are also helping out. The toilet facilities are inadequate for so many people and church authorities fear the outbreak of disease.

One of the injured told us that his uncle, aunt, grandmother and grandfather had been killed by the shelling. A wall collapsed on his father who now cannot walk. His brother has a piece of shell in his leg. Most of the houses have been damaged by shellfire.

“When the army retook the villages they photographed us all. They suspect us of being LTTE members and interrogated us. Some people were beaten. We can't go back to Allaipiddy. We face too many dangers there,” one person told us.

A housewife explained: “We heard the sounds of bombs at night. We didn't know where to run with our children. The LTTE members told us not go anywhere—to stay inside and make bunkers. We were inside a bunker for two days without food. Later a priest brought us here by bus.”

People on Kayts and other places are running out of food. There are no vegetables available. People eat rice mixed with salt or rice mixed with a little dried fish. It is an extremely difficult situation.

Some women from Karainagar who are living on Allaipiddy tried to go fishing. They thought that because they were women the navy would not harm them. But sailors attacked them with sticks and chased them away.

Everyone wants to see an end to the war. But they don't believe that the government or the LTTE will stop fighting.



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