

Sri Lankan military launches new offensive in strategic Sampur area

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The Sri Lankan military launched a major new offensive on Sunday aimed at capturing the Sampur area in the East of the island from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The operation is another flagrant breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement and again exposes the Colombo government's lies that its armed forces are engaged only in "defensive actions".

Sampur is located on the southern side of Trincomalee bay, directly opposite the major Trincomalee port and naval base. The military has been warning for years about the dangers of LTTE positions within easy range of what is a key installation for patrolling the east coast and for supplying troops based on the northern Jaffna peninsula. Having provoked the present fighting, the army has seized the opportunity to move against the LTTE's bases in the area.

Air force jets supported by naval gunboats have been pounding Sampur and nearby Muttur east. According to the military, 15 soldiers have been killed and 92 wounded so far in heavy fighting. The army admitted that the advance had been slow "because of rebel resistance". Its claims to have killed more than 60 LTTE fighters are almost certainly inflated.

LTTE spokesman Rasiyah Illantheriyan stated Monday that the military had advanced from three points in "a massive operation" from Mahindapura, Thopur and Pathanur. The LTTE has declared that it will retaliate "with full strength" to defend the area.

The LTTE claimed that the armed forces had so far killed 20 civilians and injured 26 during the fighting. Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe denied the claim, bluntly declaring: "I don't think any civilians live there." In other words, anyone—man, woman or child—in LTTE territory is regarded as the enemy and treated accordingly. Similarly, the air force dismissed evidence that it killed up to 61 school girls in

a bombing raid in Mullaitivu district on August 14 by declaring them to be "child soldiers".

The military has attempted to obscure the reasons behind the latest offensive, by claiming that the operation is necessary to help refugees from neighbouring Muttur. The LTTE captured parts of that largely Muslim town in early August in a bid to cut supply lines to government troops waging an offensive to seize the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory. The armed forces responded with a barrage of rocket and artillery fire that killed scores of civilians and forced tens of thousands to flee.

Now the military is using the results of its own indiscriminate attacks on Muttur as the justification for a further offensive against Sampur. The army could use the same threadbare pretext to justify aggression against any LTTE territory. The claim to be interested in helping refugees is belied by the fact that an estimated 200,000 people, who have been internally displaced by fighting over the past month, have received little or no assistance from the government.

Army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, however, blurted out the real reasons to Associated Press on Monday, declaring: "The security forces have taken this decision to retake Muttur, Kaddaiparichchan, Sampur and Thopur to safeguard Trincomalee naval base and the harbour... If the [rebels] continue to attack the harbour it will paralyse the Trincomalee to Jaffna supply route."

The military fears that, as the war broadens, more than 43,000 military personnel could be trapped in the northern portion of the Jaffna peninsula. All roads to the area run through LTTE territory and are already closed. The LTTE has mounted probing attacks on government defensive positions and repeatedly shelled the runways at the Palaly air base. If the LTTE were to

threaten the main sea route from Trincomalee to Jaffna, a sizeable portion of the government's military forces could be cut off.

The Reuters correspondent reported Monday that an air force transport plan landed at the Palaly air base, offloading munitions and loading the body bags of five soldiers. He also reported that the military is preparing for a lengthy war by building new underground concrete bunkers.

President Mahinda Rajapakse told diplomats in Colombo last week that any truce would have to include LTTE guarantees not to pose a threat to the Trincomalee port and naval base. The launching of a full-scale offensive in the Sampur area makes clear that the government is simply paying lip service to calls for a ceasefire, as it escalates the war in the vain hope of achieving a decisive military victory over the LTTE.

The operation in the Sampur area will almost certainly trigger LTTE attacks in other areas, as the LTTE seeks to relieve the pressure on its fighters in the East. The military has concentrated its offensives in the East, first in Mavilaru and now in Sampur, calculating that the LTTE was seriously weakened by a debilitating split in its ranks in the eastern region in 2004. The breakaway "Karuna group" has been operating against the LTTE in collusion with the military for months.

While most fighting is taking place in the Sampur area, clashes have also been reported in the North at Poowarasakulam, Muhammalai and the Kachchai lagoon near Jaffna. The LTTE has also intensified its mortar attacks on the large Vavunathivu army camp near the eastern town of Batticaloa.

The Rajapakse government plunged the country back to war a month ago with its bogus "humanitarian" mission to capture the Mavilaru sluice gate. The LTTE opened the disputed irrigation canal, but the military has continued its aggressive operations against long-planned objectives such as the LTTE's Sampur bases.

If one were to believe the military's propaganda—republished uncritically in the pages of the Colombo press—the operations have all been successful. The LTTE's attacks have been repulsed, hundreds of LTTE fighters have been killed, and the army has succeeded in advancing into rebel territory. The air force has used Israeli fighter jets, purchased after the military suffered serious defeats in 2000, to indiscriminately strafe LTTE-held areas.

In this context, it is significant that a long-time defence correspondent, Iqbal Athas, warned against excessive euphoria in his "Situation Report" in last weekend's *Sunday Times*. He noted that a similar atmosphere had prevailed in late 1995 when the army succeeded in retaking Jaffna town from LTTE control, only to be followed by a huge defeat in mid-1996 when the LTTE overran the Mullaitivu military base, killing over 1,000 soldiers and capturing large quantities of weapons.

Athas, who has close links to the military hierarchy, concluded: "The ongoing offensive on Tiger guerrillas will no doubt lead to considerable damage and some curtailment of their military capacity. But there is a formidable challenge for the government. It would have to beat them not only on the battlefield but on several other fronts... Hence prolonged military action will not end the ongoing problem. More war will only mean more damage to the economy and heaping further hardships on the people."

These comments underscore the fact that the Rajapakse government, for its own short-sighted political ends, is plunging the country back into a disastrous civil war that it cannot win militarily and that will inevitably mean more suffering and hardship for the vast majority of the population.



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