

Capture of Sampur sets stage for intensification of civil war in Sri Lanka

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After days of fighting, the Sri Lankan government forces last Sunday captured the key eastern town of Sampur from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Colombo government and media immediately hailed the operation as a great victory, indicating that the military intends to expand its offensive against the LTTE.

The offensive, which involved thousands of troops, was launched on August 26 and took nine days to complete. The air force used fighter jets to indiscriminately bomb areas in and around Sampur, forcing thousands of civilians flee. LTTE fighters finally withdrew from Sampur well before soldiers entered the town.

According to military spokesmen, the army lost 15 dead and 90 injured and claims to have killed more than 90 LTTE fighters. There is no independent verification of the casualties or the intensity of the fighting. While the military denied there were any civilians in the area, an LTTE spokesman announced that 97 civilians had been killed.

The seizure of Sampur is an open breach of the 2002 ceasefire, making clear that the government continues to abide by the truce in name only. The area, which lies directly opposite the major port and naval base at Trincomalee, has long been one of the military's key objectives. The first air attacks on LTTE positions in Sampur took place in April, ostensibly in retaliation for a suicide bombing in Colombo that nearly claimed the life of Army Commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka.

In late July, President Mahinda Rajapakse launched the first major military offensive to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate on the "humanitarian" pretext of providing water for farmers. The operation provoked LTTE retaliation, including the temporary seizure of parts of Muttur, adjacent to Sampur, and the shelling of Trincomalee harbour. The military responded with air and artillery attacks.

Rajapakse also tried to dress up the latest operation in humanitarian garb, declaring: "Our armed forces have captured Sampur for the welfare and benefit of the people living there." The same rationale could, of course, be used to justify the capture of any LTTE territory. In fact, the operation was conducted to achieve military aims with no regard for the "welfare of the people" or the terms of the ceasefire agreement.

Since late July, more than 200,000 civilians have been displaced and forced to live in makeshift camps without adequate food or medicine. According to the LTTE, the latest fighting in Sampur has swelled refugee numbers in Vaharai near Batticaloa to around 45,000. The security forces have refused to allow aid to those sheltering in LTTE-held areas.

Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella absurdly argued that the latest offensive was not aimed at "occupying the territory"—and so presumably not a formal breach of the ceasefire. Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe, however, declared that the army was "consolidating" its positions and intended to build "military camps" in the Sampur area. A police post has already been established in the town. According to *Lankadeepa*, troops are now engaged in military operations to take control of villages around Sampur.

Thorfinnur Omarsson, a spokesman for the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) which oversees the ceasefire, expressed the hope that the government's military offensive had ended, saying that it would otherwise mean the complete collapse of the 2002 truce. "The Tigers are asking us if the truce is over. We certainly hope it is not," he said.

The military's "victory" in Sampur, however, is only fanning the war fever in ruling circles in Colombo. On Monday, Rajapakse triumphantly told the convention of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that the government would respond to the "terrorists in the language they best comprehend".

The Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is demanding that the government launch an all-out offensive against the LTTE. In a statement on Tuesday, JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa jubilantly praised the military and insisted it needed "to wipe out LTTE from the entire eastern province." Then, he added, "Tiger terrorists should also be eliminated from the northern province."

The JVP already supports the Rajapakse government in parliament, but negotiations are underway for bringing the party into the cabinet. The JVP's 20 demands include abrogating the 2002 ceasefire and dismissing Norway as the formal facilitator of the peace process. To date, Rajapakse has been reluctant to openly embrace the JVP's program of war, preferring instead to disguise the military's aggressive operations.

At a press conference on Wednesday, Weerawansa and other JVP leaders went on the political offensive, accusing Rajapakse and the government of a “lack of courage” and an inability to “think straight.” Weerawansa declared that the ceasefire agreement, which has been in place for more than four years, was unconstitutional and therefore should be torn up. By this contorted logic, any negotiations or truce with the LTTE would also be “unconstitutional” as, by their very nature, national constitutions do not sanction civil war.

It is not just the JVP, however. The entire ruling establishment is joining the war hysteria after the “victory” in Sampur. The opposition United National Party (UNP), which signed the ceasefire in 2002 and championed the so-called peace process, has not opposed the slide back to war. This week, the UNP openly expressed its “happiness” about the military’s latest offensive and “welcomed” its achievement in capturing Sampur.

The poisonous atmosphere in Colombo is best illustrated by an editorial yesterday in what passes for the “moderate press”—the *Daily Mirror*. “It is unimaginable that any person or group in this country, except the LTTE and its hardcore supporters, who will fail to laud the forces for this achievement,” it declared, adding: “Even those who shun armed conflicts and violence for resolution of political problems will not hesitate to welcome this event as a contributory factor for the achievement of peace through nonviolent means.”

The editorial echoes the notorious “war for peace” motto of the President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who first came to power in 1994 promising peace, only to intensify the war against the LTTE. Under her SLFP-led government, which held power until 2002, the country witnessed more death and destruction than under the previous right-wing UNP governments. Far from being “a contributory factor” for peace, the latest aggression against the LTTE will only lead to an intensifying bloodbath.

There is an element of self-delusion in all of this propaganda. In the euphoria over Sampur, the political establishment seems to have forgotten all of the past defeats and appears to believe that what has eluded the military for more than two decades—an outright victory—is now possible. Whatever the outcome of the immediate battles, the island’s civil war is rooted in political and social contradictions for which the ruling elites have no solution. Any “victory” over the LTTE will only mean that the deep-rooted resentment and anger among the island’s Tamil minority over systemic communal discrimination will erupt in another form.

There is no sign that the government is about to halt the present military offensive. Further attacks on LTTE camps in the eastern district of Amparai have taken place this week. According to the Colombo media, the Karuna group, a breakaway faction from the LTTE, carried out the operation in conjunction with the military.

In another move, the Sri Lankan Central Bank last week

obtained a legal writ from the courts to freeze all funds of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) for six months. The pro-LTTE TRO is a registered charity and has operated since 1985. Cutting off the TRO’s funds will have a disastrous affect on civilians living in the North and East, who have been devastated by 20 years of war and the 2004 tsunami.

The LTTE has responded to the loss of Sampur by informing the Norwegian ambassador Hans Brattskar that it considered the government’s actions to be the end of the ceasefire agreement. As political wing leader S.P. Thamilchelvan told the press, “One of the basic requirements of the CFA [ceasefire agreement] is to respect the existing borders of control.” While Brattskar was in the LTTE headquarters in Kilinochchi, an air force jet provocatively buzzed overhead.

Thamilchelvan revealed once again the political bankruptcy of the LTTE’s perspective. He complained of the “lack of action” of the “international community” to the offensive and the plight of Tamils. The appeal for the support of the major powers is completely futile. The “international community” backed the so-called peace process, not out of any concern for the people of Sri Lanka, but to end a conflict that cut across the regional interests of the US and other powers. The “lack of action” simply indicates a change of tactic—the US in particular is quietly backing the Rajapakse government’s efforts to end the conflict by military means.

In a rather ominous warning, Thamilchelvan went on to declare that “the international community should not behave any differently when, as a consequence of government action on Tamil people, Sinhala people face the same fate in the future.” Like the government, the LTTE is rooted in reactionary communal politics. Boxed into a corner, the LTTE could, as in the past, answer the military’s atrocities against Tamil civilians with atrocities of its own against the “Sinhala people”. Such a step would only further fuel the descent into a disastrous civil war.



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