

Sri Lankan military offensive on the Jaffna peninsula pushed back

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A failed offensive by the Sri Lankan military on the Jaffna peninsula resulted in heavy government casualties as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) repulsed advancing troops near Muhamalai and Kilali on Wednesday. The ground attacks, supported by jet fighters and naval gunboats, were aimed at key LTTE positions in the south of the peninsula.

As in the case of other government offensives in Sri Lanka's north and east over the past three months, the military claimed that its actions were purely defensive. Defence spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told the media that the army had successfully driven back a massive LTTE attack and killed hundreds of its fighters. His initial death toll for government forces was just 22 with more than 110 soldiers injured.

The story quickly fell to pieces. By Thursday evening, Samarasinghe admitted that the bodies of 55 soldiers had been recovered, another 78 were missing and 283 had been wounded. The new figures tallied more closely with the LTTE's claims to have defeated a major army offensive and killed more than 200 troops.

Samarasinghe also acknowledged that the LTTE was preparing to hand over the bodies of 75 soldiers via the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC). He did not explain the obvious: why was the LTTE handing back bodies from its territory if the military had engaged in a "defensive" operation? The LTTE also captured an 18-year-old soldier, Samantha Veerasingha.

The Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the 2002 ceasefire agreement, commented to the press: "If the Tigers' have recovered 75 dead troops, that would suggest the army had been mounting a fresh offensive inside rebel areas, despite the rebels' warnings."

For all the public propaganda, the mood in the military establishment was sombre. The AFP news agency quoted a top defence source as saying: "There is no doubt that the army suffered a bloody nose.... It was a big mistake." Another report cited high-ranking military sources who said the army was forced to abandon its offensive after striking fierce resistance.

A further indication of government concern was an AFP report indicating that President Mahinda Rajapakse had directed "ministers to all the hospitals to attend to the needs of the soldiers".

Since launching its first offensive against LTTE-held territory in the eastern Mavilaru area in July, the military has attempted to censor reportage of the fighting. There are growing signs, however, that the renewed war is creating discontent inside the army as casualties have steadily mounted.

Last Friday, the army launched another major operation to capture LTTE-held areas of Mankerni in the eastern district of Batticaloa. About 12 troops were killed in the operation. R.M.S. Ratnayake, a captured soldier, told SLMM officials that 300 government troops were involved, along with 80 fighters from the para-military Karuna group—a breakaway LTTE faction. Defence spokesmen have repeatedly denied any connection to the Karuna group or other Tamil paramilitaries.

The objective of the latest offensive on the Jaffna peninsula was obvious. In 2000, the military suffered a serious blow when the LTTE seized the army's base at Elephant Pass for the first time in the country's protracted civil war. The base is a key strategic entry point to the peninsula. Its capture allowed LTTE fighters to rapidly advance toward Jaffna town and major military bases on the north of the peninsula. The army launched this week's failed operation in a bid to

retake Elephant Pass.

The offensive makes a mockery of government claims that it is seeking an end to the conflict at peace talks scheduled for October 28-29 in Geneva. During discussions on Tuesday with the Norwegian ambassador Hans Brattskar over the Geneva talks, LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamilchelvan complained that the military was massing troops and tanks near Muhamalai. He warned that the LTTE would reconsider its participation if the army proceeded with its provocative attack.

Speaking to the ambassadors of US, EU, Japan and Norway on Monday, President Rajapakse reiterated that the government was committed to a negotiated settlement, but would be “compelled to take appropriate counter measures to ensure security”. Given that every army offensive so far has been “defensive,” Rajapakse’s words are worthless. This week’s offensive is one more sign that the government has no intention of negotiating in good faith.

The purpose of the offensives is to strengthen the hand of government negotiators and force the LTTE to make significant concessions. The “Situation Report” column in last weekend’s *Sunday Times* revealed that military leaders in high-level discussions with the government were insisting on a tough stand at any peace talks. “The military top brass were strongly of the view that the gains of the military should be protected and no opportunity be given to guerillas to further endanger national security interests. They insisted LTTE is ‘seeking time to re-group, rearm and were to pose further threats,’” the column stated.

In discussions with Norwegian ambassador Brattskar and special envoy Jon Hanssen Bauer on October 3, army commander Sarath Fonseka declared that the military would take aggressive action against the LTTE whenever it saw fit. “As far as the military is concerned they [the army] will carry out pre-emptive strikes where necessary to blunt the LTTE’s capability to carry out terrorist attacks.” Fonseka said the LTTE had been weakened and military was not ready to give them “a new lease of life”.

The LTTE is no doubt hoping that pushing back the military this week will give it more leverage at the Geneva peace talks. LTTE spokesman Rasaiah Ilanthiraiyan declared yesterday: “The SLA [army] offensive inside the LTTE territory disregards the

expectations of international community and brushes aside the Co-Chairs’ call to cease violence and engage in talks.” It was another futile plea to the major powers to pressure the Rajapakse government to reach a power-sharing agreement.

Significantly, in the midst of news of the failing government offensive, US State Department spokesman Sean McComack issued a statement welcoming peace talks but declaring that the US “is deeply concerned that ongoing violence in Sri Lanka is putting the agreement at risk”. Far from being genuinely concerned about peace, Washington has tacitly backed the Rajapakse government’s renewed war against the LTTE. Its only “concern” is that the operations are not going as planned.

The government’s real plans are revealed in the budget estimates announced last week for 2007. Military spending is projected to jump 45 percent next year from 96 billion rupees to 139.6 billion rupees. The defence budget has already been revised upward this year from 76 billion rupees to 96 billion rupees after the war intensified.

There is no doubt that ordinary working people will be forced to bear the burden of Rajapakse’s war through the loss of jobs and essential services as well as the rising death toll.



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