Military conflict escalates in Sri Lanka after two major LTTE attacks

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out two major attacks against the Sri Lankan military in the past three days, raising the danger of a further escalation in the open civil war that has erupted since late July.

At least 102 people were killed and more than 150 wounded, mostly sailors, in a suicide bomb attack on Monday at Habarana, about 170 km northeast of the capital, Colombo. The place is a transit point for sailors and soldiers coming to and from the naval and army camps in the eastern port of Trincomalee.

A suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with explosives into an area where around 20 buses carrying nearly 350 navy personnel were parked. While it has not formally claimed responsibility, the LTTE, which has a long history of suicide bombings, almost certainly carried out the attack.

Yesterday, five LTTE boats, several laden with explosives, attacked the main naval base in the southern city of Galle. Details are still sketchy, but it appears that two naval vessels were damaged. According to the military, two soldiers died in the clash and 26 others, including several civilians, were wounded. All 15 rebels were killed.

The Colombo government immediately denounced the attacks. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella branded the Habarana bombing as a "barbaric terrorist act". "It clearly shows that peace is not on the agenda of the LTTE and they don't care about international opinion."

The military retaliated with air strikes against LTTE-controlled areas, using Israeli-built Kfir jets, one of which crashed shortly after take off. According to LTTE reports, a number of civilians, including two young girls, were killed and injured in the raids, which struck the LTTE's radio station and transmitting tower, among other targets. Further air attacks were carried out yesterday following the clash in Galle.

The clashes take place amid preparations for peace talks due to be held in Geneva on October 28-29. Japan's special envoy Yashushi Akashi was in Colombo on Monday to meet with President Mahinda Rajapakse, while Norway's envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer and US assistant secretary of state Richard Boucher are due in Sri Lankan this week.

Rambukwella and other spokesmen are seeking to exploit the latest attacks to enlist the support of the major powers at any talks to pressure the LTTE. But the chief responsibility for the escalating war rests squarely with the Rajapakse government, which launched a major offensive to seize the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory in July. The attack was an obvious breach of the 2002 ceasefire.

Rambukwella's outrage over the Habarana "terrorist act" and declarations of support for peace talks are completely hypocritical. Last week, just days after the Geneva talks had been agreed, the military provocatively launched another substantial offensive against LTTE positions at Muhamalai, in the narrow land corridor to the northern Jaffna peninsula.

The government initially claimed the military's actions were "defensive"—the official pretext for all its offensives over the past three months. The claim soon proved to be a lie. The attack turned into a debacle as soldiers ran into heavily entrenched LTTE fighters. Around 130 soldiers were killed and more than 500 wounded in fierce fighting before being forced to retreat.

Over half the dead soldiers were left behind inside LTTE territory. The LTTE formally handed over the bodies to the army via the International Red Cross. As the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire, diplomatically stated: "If the Tigers have recovered 75 dead troops, that would suggest the army had been mounting a fresh offensive inside rebel areas,

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despite the rebels' warnings."

Undaunted, the government concocted a new story: that the attack, and thus the defeat, was the responsibility of a rogue officer. The most elaborate version was set out by Iqbal Athas, who has close ties to the military command, in his regular "Situation Report" in last weekend's *Sunday Times*. According to Athas, he had it on good authority that the president and the National Security Council knew nothing about the military action.

"If there was a major military offensive in [Muhamalai], which indeed has turned out to be the case, the political leadership was completely unaware. So were high-ranking officials except for one, who had tried to persuade an 'over enthusiastic' military official, awaiting an extension of service, not to go ahead," Athas wrote, repeating the same point several times throughout the article.

The offensive, however, was no major secret. The LTTE had expressed its concern to the SLMM, two days before the attack, about preparations for the offensive, which involved large numbers of troops backed by armoured vehicles and air support. The LTTE's warning was reported in the local and international press. It is absurd to claim that Rajapakse and the defence chiefs read the media but took no action, especially as they knew it would affect the impending peace talks.

The truth is that the flimsy story was invented to cover up a major embarrassment. As Athas himself noted: "More than anything else, Wednesday's ill-planned operation conducted without the knowledge of the political leadership and against the wishes of senior officials has clearly embarrassed the Mahinda Rajapakse government. Its credibility was been brought into question in the eyes of the international community."

In preparing for the Geneva talks, the government's unstated strategy has been to weaken the LTTE as much as possible. The offensive in Muhamalai is just one of several operations, including in Sampur and the Batticaloa district, aimed at seizing LTTE-held territory. Not surprisingly, the LTTE has struck back to try to shore up its position prior to negotiations.

Government spokesman Rambukwella denounced the LTTE for killing "unarmed" sailors on Monday. An attack on naval personnel, armed or not, constitutes far more of a legitimate military target than the indiscriminate use of aerial and artillery bombardments on LTTE-held areas. Rambukwella defended the air force bombing of a school in August that killed scores of female students by falsely declaring the dead were "child soldiers". He was not troubled at the time that these "child soldiers" were unarmed.

Such propaganda is part of the government's efforts to whip up a climate of anti-Tamil hysteria to justify a war that the vast majority of the population does not want. Following the LTTE attack in Galle yesterday, Sinhala chauvinist mobs attacked several Tamil-owned shops in the area, throwing stones and smashing windows. Rambukwella blamed the LTTE for trying to provoke "some kind of backlash" but he and the government are chiefly responsible for creating the communal atmosphere.

The Rajapakse government is supported by Sinhala extremist parties, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has been more and more openly campaigning for war. Following the attack in Galle, the JVP urged the government not to attend the talks in Geneva. "If the government is to resume peace talks in Geneva, we insist that they give it up," JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa demagogically declared. "It's high time for would-be government peace envoys to stop ironing their clothes to go to Geneva."

The most significant reaction came from the Bush administration, however. State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack condemned Monday's attack at Habarana, declaring the US has "long designated LTTE as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation" and insisting the "LTTE must renounce the use of terror". Formally at least, Washington still backs the so-called peace process. In practice, however, the US has turned a blind eye to the constant ratchetting up of the conflict since Rajapakse came to office last November. McCormack, of course, had nothing to say about last week's military offensive at Muhamalai.

The Bush administration's tacit support for Rajapakse has been a significant factor in encouraging the government and the military to ignore the 2002 ceasefire agreement and go on the offensive against the LTTE.

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