

Sri Lankan military launches new offensive in country's east

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16 December 2006

The Sri Lankan military launched a fresh offensive over the past week to seize the Vaharai area in the island's eastern Batticaloa district from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The aggressive new operations are another blatant breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, which the government still claims to uphold.

There are no independent media reports but it is clear that the fighting has been intense. According to the military and state-run media, some 300 people had been killed up to Thursday, including 28 soldiers and 115 LTTE fighters. Thousands of people have fled the area and many more are seeking to escape.

A UNHCR statement issued on Tuesday declared it was "gravely concerned at the deteriorating prospects facing civilians in Vaharai" amid "intense shelling." The statement noted that "an unconfirmed number of civilians are dead with dozens lying wounded at Vaharai hospital".

At least eight refugees drowned yesterday after four fishing boats in which they were fleeing capsized. The government's media centre blamed the LTTE for keeping 30,000 civilians in the Vaharai area and using them as "human shields". According to the LTTE, however, the army has closed down the main A-15 highway running between Trincomalee and Batticaloa.

The army has refused access to the area to journalists and the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which still attempts to supervise the defunct ceasefire agreement. While denying closing the A-15, the military admitted that movement on the road is restricted. Spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe said the highway had been open only for ambulances, food convoys and emergencies since August 26.

In other words, the military has sealed the area deliberately, creating hardship and chaos in the LTTE-

held area in preparation for offensive operations. Its accusations that the LTTE is using civilians as "human shields" are no more credible than similar claims by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Israeli war machine in southern Lebanon.

There are claims and counterclaims about the impact of protracted artillery and mortar exchanges. The military alleges that an LTTE artillery attack on a school in the village of Kallar killed four civilians. Some 4,000 mainly Sinhalese families have since fled from Kallar and nearby villages. The LTTE claimed that military artillery fire on December 9 and 10 killed 34 people sheltering in refugee camps. It also alleged that the military refused to allow the critically injured to be evacuated by road to the Batticaloa hospital.

Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe bluntly stated that the aim of the current operations was to capture a 22-kilometre stretch of coast in the eastern districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. "We want to get the LTTE out of this area and free the civilians," he said. "The LTTE are firing artillery and mortars towards civilian settlements and camps in Trincomalee south and keeping 35,000 people as human shields. So we have to respond to that threat as a countermeasure. We will control most of the coastline in the east."

Vaharai is situated between Kathirveli and Mankerni to the south of Sampur, which the army captured in late August. If the operation in Vaharai succeeds, the military will be in a strong position to isolate and seize other LTTE-held areas in the east. By taking the coastline, the army will also restrict the activities of the LTTE's naval wing south of the Sri Lankan navy's strategic base at Trincomalee.

While the offensive is a clear violation of the 2002 ceasefire, none of the major powers overseeing the international "peace process"—the US, the EU, Norway

and Japan—has issued any criticism of the government’s actions.

After a meeting of the so-called Co-chairs last month, US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns openly stated Washington’s partisan support for the Colombo government and its military offensives declaring, “The United States Government is not neutral... We are working with Sri Lanka as a partner in counter-terrorism as well as counter-proliferation.”

US backing has encouraged the Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse to be even more blatant and aggressive. Previously the government attempted to disguise its military offensives against the LTTE as purely “defensive” operations. Now this pretext has been dropped and the Colombo is bluntly speaking of a “war of liberation” aimed at capturing large areas of LTTE-held territory.

In comments to the state-owned *Dinamina* newspaper on Tuesday, army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka boasted that the military had captured two of the LTTE’s defence lines in the Vaharai area. “The people will be liberated from the Tigers soon and the LTTE will be driven out of eastern province very soon,” he declared.

Fonseka was even more explicit in a three-day visit to Washington late last month. A Sri Lankan embassy press release summarising the discussion stated that the general “was of the view that unless [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran was militarily weakened there could be no chance for peace and that he will not toe the line advocated by the international community.”

Fonseka said: “In effect, the four years of ceasefire had helped the LTTE to become a stronger fighting force. Therefore, it was imperative that GOSL [the government] checks his [Prabhakaran’s] military capacity.” That was exactly what the army had been doing over the past few months, he explained to top US officials. Referring to the loss of 300 soldiers in the Muhamalai area of the Jaffna peninsula, Fonseka insisted that such sacrifices were necessary.

This is the same “war for peace” doublespeak that Rajapakse’s predecessor Chandrika Kumaratunga employed to justify the continuation of the savage civil war in the 1990s. The government’s claims to be “liberating” Tamils are absurd. In fact, the systematic anti-Tamil discrimination and military occupation of the North and East by successive governments has

continued to fuel the country’s protracted civil war.

Before the current offensive, the Rajapakse government re-imposed and strengthened the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act, which provides for extended detention without trial. The act will inevitably be used to harass, threaten and abuse the Tamil minority. Prior to the 2002 ceasefire, thousands of Tamils were detained as “LTTE suspects” for years and in many cases tortured. This is the character of the “liberation” currently being carried out by the military in Vaharai.



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