

Sri Lankan military carries out another atrocity against civilians

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The Sri Lankan military has begun the year with another atrocity as it escalates the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

On Tuesday, the air force bombed a Tamil refugee settlement at Padahuthurai near Illupaikadavai in the northwestern district of Mannar. According to an LTTE spokesman, the air raid killed at least 14 civilians, including men, women and children, and injured another 35, who were taken to hospitals in Mannar and Kilinochchi. Scores of shelters were destroyed or damaged.

The military immediately denied bombing civilians. Air force spokesman Group Captain Ajantha Silva told a press conference that two known LTTE targets had been struck—at Mannar and Vaharai in the east. Unclear aerial photos were later released to “prove” that the Mannar target had been an LTTE base. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared that if civilians were killed, the LTTE must have forcibly kept them there.

The Catholic Bishop of Mannar, Rayappu Joseph, who visited the area, condemned the killings. He told the BBC: “I could not find any Tamil Tiger base in that vicinity. It was a small fishing community. The injured and killed were civilians.” He has written to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to register a complaint over the attack.

Margareta Wahlström, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, issued a statement expressing concern over the Tuesday killings and calling on both sides to protect civilians. Her press release noted that the village of Illupaikadavai, near the air raid, is where “more than 4,000 displaced Sri Lankans have sought shelter from the conflict since early 2006”.

The statement pointed out that nearly 213,000 people

have been displaced by the resumption of war in 2006, along with an estimated 120,000 to 140,000 rendered homeless by the tsunami disaster in 2004 December. This is in addition to 315,000 people previously displaced by two decades of civil war.

The UN has called for “a cessation of hostilities” and a resumption of the so-called international peace process. The Rajapakse government, however, for all its empty professions of abiding by the 2002 ceasefire, has no intention of ending hostilities. Since coming to power in November 2005, Rajapakse has steadily escalated the war against the LTTE—first, as covert killings and then from last July a series of open military offensives carried out under the guise of “humanitarian” and “defensive” operations.

Army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka blurted out the real aims of military operations in comments to the media on Tuesday. During a visit to Kandy to meet top Buddhist priests, he declared: “After eradicating the Tigers from the East, [the military’s] full strength will be used to rescue the North.” A few days earlier, he predicted that the military would capture the eastern areas of Vaharai and Kathirveli within a month.

The Padahuthurai bombing is just the latest in a series of atrocities aimed at terrorising the civilian population in LTTE-held territory. In each case, the Sri Lankan military has strenuously denied attacking civilian targets, then as evidence mounts, blamed the LTTE for using them as “human shields”. President Rajapakse has promised a series of investigations, but none of the military chiefs responsible have been held accountable.

The main focus of the military’s operations is in the east of the island. For weeks, it has been bombarding the Vaharai area in the Batticaloa district with artillery and from the air. On the same day as the Padahuthurai

bombing, the air force claimed to have destroyed a heavy artillery position in Vaharai. On Wednesday, another air attack was carried out, purportedly on an LTTE heavy arms depot near Verugal in the same area.

The armed forces have already seized two key eastern areas since July—Mavilaru and the strategically important Sampur region south of the major Trincomalee naval base. If it is able to seize the Vaharai-Verugal area—the LTTE’s main landing zone in the east—the military will be able to cut off LTTE forces in the east from their main stronghold in the northern Wanni region. The LTTE in the east would also be divided.

The military is applying the same tactic used in seizing Sampur—sustained, indiscriminate air raids and artillery barrages to create the maximum confusion and chaos. Scores of civilians have been killed in such attacks over the past two months. About 40,000 people have fled the area and are living in appalling conditions in makeshift refugee camps in Batticaloa. Another 15,000 have been unable to leave as the army has blocked the roads.

President Rajapakse held a National Security Council (NSC) meeting for the first time at the Trincomalee naval base on December 27 to review the security situation in the east. The meeting, which included top defence officials and the commanders of the three armed forces, clearly gave its blessing for the continuing offensive to, in army chief Fonseka’s words, “eradicate the Tigers from the East”.

The military has placed large new orders for hardware, explosives and ammunition. *Jane’s Defence Weekly* reported that \$US200 million would be spent over the next 18 months on tanks, different kinds of bombs, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and armoured vehicles. The Rajapakse government increased its defence expenditure by 45 percent this year.

The LTTE has responded largely defensively. In an attempt to take the pressure off its positions in the Batticaloa district, it has stepped up attacks on the military in the North. On Monday, it launched three attacks in the Vadamarachchi area of the northern Jaffna peninsula. LTTE military spokesman Rasaiah Ilanthiraiyan said that if the military’s operations continued in the east, the LTTE would “take pre-emptive actions in future”.

Along with its offensives against the LTTE, the government and the military are cracking down on any opposition to the war. The *Island* reported that army chief Fonseka had, in an “interaction” with correspondents, “accused a section of the media of capitalising on certain lapses of the military, thereby jeopardising national security”. He accused them of “misreporting and in some cases exaggerating battlefield losses suffered by the military” and urged “the media to be patriotic as security forces battled the LTTE”.

President Rajapakse reiterated the warning last Sunday. He declared that the media should not “betray” the country and “jeopardise national security interests”. In November, the government reintroduced a strengthened version of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which provides for protracted detention without trial for a wide range of offenses. The island is already under a state of emergency which can be used by the president to impose press censorship.

The war to “eradicate the Tigers” makes a mockery of Rajapakse’s New Year address. “We hope the New Year will bring the long awaited genuine and sustainable peace,” he declared, as the military intensified its operations in the east. Like his predecessor Chandrika Kumaratunga’s “war for peace” in the 1990s, it is ordinary working people who will inevitably be compelled to bear the costs of this renewed conflict.



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