

Sri Lankan military captures strategic eastern town from LTTE

Sarath Kumara
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After imposing a siege lasting months, the Sri Lankan security forces finally took the key eastern coastal town of Vaharai last Friday in what is a significant blow to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Vaharai is the latest in a series of LTTE strongholds that have fallen to government troops since July.

The army entered the town without much resistance. Faced with the prospect of being trapped between government troops to the north and south, the LTTE withdrew. By Sunday, the security forces had extended their control to the adjoining areas of Verugal and Kathirvelu. An LTTE spokesman acknowledged the loss saying that its fighters had “readjusted” their positions.

Fighting appears to have been sporadic. The military claimed on Sunday to have killed 18 LTTE fighters fleeing from the area. Four soldiers were killed in an LTTE attack on the Kajuwatta military camp and another two soldiers died in a clash at Vavunathivu. According to the defence ministry, government forces have lost 35 soldiers since October and killed 331 LTTE fighters.

The protracted military offensive to seize Vaharai makes a mockery of government claims to be adhering to the 2002 ceasefire agreement. President Mahinda Rajapakse has repeatedly claimed that the army has only engaged in “defensive” actions. Since July, however, the military has seized the eastern areas of Mavilaru, Sampur and now Vaharai. Earlier this month, army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka dropped the pretence and bluntly declared that his aim was to drive the LTTE from the East, then launch an offensive to take control of the north.

The LTTE captured Vaharai eleven years ago and have used it as the landing site for fighters and supplies from the northern coastal base of Mullaitivu. Vaharai lies on the major road running between the port of Trincomalee and Batticaloa to the south. Its loss effectively cuts the LTTE’s forces in the East in two, leaving them

vulnerable to the military’s continuing offensives.

Far from reacting “defensively”, the Sri Lankan army is following the advice of the US military, which sent a team from US Pacific Command (PACOM) in 2002 to make a strategic assessment. PACOM described Trincomalee harbour as “without question” the most important base for the Sri Lankan navy and pointed to its vulnerability to attack from LTTE bases in the Sampur area to the south of the port. It bluntly advised the army to secure the area.

Sunday Times defence correspondent Iqbal Athas, who cited the PACOM report in his column last weekend, commented: “Now that Vaharai and adjoining areas have been re-captured, it provides greater depth in protecting Trincomalee harbour. More importantly, it denies to the guerrillas the opportunity of directing artillery and mortar fire at the neighbouring Kajuwatta and Mankerni detachments. The army regaining control of Vaharai denies to the guerrillas a contiguous land-based route from the Trincomalee to the Batticaloa district.”

In a statement on Sunday reeking of hypocrisy, Rajapakse hailed the capture of Vaharai as “a victory for all peace loving people”. He boasted that “the security forces have been able to liberate 95 percent of the East from the grip of the LTTE with valour and determination”.

The “liberation” of Vaharai has been at a terrible human cost. The military sealed the main access roads, prohibiting local and international aid agencies and denying access to journalists. Even the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which is responsible for overseeing the 2002 ceasefire, was barred from the area. The security forces strictly controlled the entry of basic supplies—the last dispatch being on November 29.

The siege was coupled with indiscriminate air raids and artillery attacks, inflicting heavy casualties. At least 90 civilians were killed, according to the estimates of the SLMM and other agencies. Several hundred have been

injured. The government and military justified the attacks on civilian locations, including refugee camps, claiming that the LTTE was using civilians as “human shields.” An artillery attack on the Vaharai hospital on January 17 injured 11 people, seven seriously.

Civilians fled the area last week by any means available. UN spokeswoman Orla Clinton described the scene: “Thousands of people are streaming out... food has been very short... these people are obviously weak and afraid and we are looking for assurances their protection will be assured.” On Saturday, after the army had seized the town, another 7,000 people left the area.

Long queues of people waited at army checkpoints to be allowed out of the area. Heavily armed soldiers hunting for LTTE members arbitrarily detained a number of young people. According to the UNCHR, about 60,000 people have been displaced from the coastal belt between Sampur and Vaharai since the latest round of fighting began. In all, about 205,000 people throughout the island have been displaced since April.

The capture of Vaharai has intensified chauvinist exaltations in Colombo. The right-wing *Island* proclaimed that the war has now entered “a decisive phase.” The Sinhala daily *Lakbima* proudly pointed to the “Lion [national] flag glittering in the [Vaharai] hospital premises.”

In fact, for all his talk of “peace”, Rajapakse has made clear that the military offensive will continue. On Saturday, army commander Fonseka outlined his plans to “clear the Thoppigala and Kokkadicholai areas of the LTTE.” They “will soon be chased out of the Eastern Province,” he boasted.

On Monday, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared: “If tomorrow the LTTE says we are ready to stop hostilities and get back to the negotiating table we will stop immediately. If they do not, then we we’ll have to liberate the Tamil civilians in the East and call for negotiations.” Given that the army has initiated every major act of aggression since July, the statement was not an offer, but an ultimatum to the LTTE to return to the negotiating table on the government’s terms.

The mood of elation in ruling circles in Colombo is palpable. Buoyed by its recent successes, the military clearly feels that it is just a matter of time before it defeats the LTTE militarily—something that it has failed to do in more than two decades. The government, which enjoys the tacit support of the US and other major powers, obviously thinks that it can proceed with its reckless war of aggression without provoking political opposition at

home or internationally

Even *Sunday Times* correspondent Athas, who has close ties to military circles, sounded a note of caution. In last weekend’s column, he warned against “overt euphoria or jubilance”, noting that the LTTE forces had withdrawn largely intact. Athas recalled the government’s triumphal reaction to the recapture of the Jaffna peninsula in 1995 and pointed out that barely seven months later the armed forces had suffered one of their worst-ever defeats when the LTTE launched a major attack on the Mullaitivu military base.

Athas also noted that the military was relying on the support of the so-called Karuna group—an armed militia based in the East that broke from the LTTE in 2004. In return for supporting the war against the LTTE, V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, was permitted to build up his armed forces and extend the influence of his political wing—the Thamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (TVMP). According to Athas, sections of the military hierarchy were “deeply concerned” that the government “was encouraging and even building another monster”.

It is highly unlikely that Athas’s warnings will cause the government to pull back from its reactionary course. Since narrowly winning office in November 2005, Rajapakse has relaunched the communal civil war as a means of dividing working people and distracting public attention from his failure to resolve the island’s deepening economic and social crisis. Increasingly his government has resorted to open repression to suppress opposition to the war and to the government’s economic policies. In doing so, however, he is laying the basis for social and political upheavals in the not too distant future.



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