

Sri Lankan government exploits attack on foreign delegation to intensify war

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The Sri Lankan government has seized on an incident on Tuesday, in which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired on military helicopters carrying foreign dignitaries, to push for tougher action against the separatist rebels.

The foreign officials, including the US, German, Japanese, Canadian and French ambassadors and the UN head of mission, were visiting the eastern town of Batticaloa, accompanied by the Disaster Management and Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe.

The delegation came under artillery and mortar fire after disembarking at a military airfield. Italian ambassador Pio Mariani sustained minor shrapnel wounds to the head and was taken to hospital. Several other diplomats and military personnel received minor injuries.

Sri Lanka's military has waged a series of offensives in the eastern province since last July. In open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, it has seized the areas of Mavilaru, Sampur and, most recently, Vaharai from the LTTE. The army's operations have displaced tens of thousands of civilians. The foreign officials were to hold a meeting to discuss the "humanitarian and development issues" of displaced persons in the district.

The government and military officials immediately went on a propaganda offensive, accusing the LTTE of deliberately targetting the international delegation. The Sri Lankan embassy in Washington issued a statement denouncing the attack as "a show of callous disregard for human life and arrogance and defiance in the face of international censure against Tamil Tiger terrorism".

Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe admitted, however, that the LTTE had not been informed of the visit, "due to security reasons." He nevertheless insisted that the attack had been deliberate,

saying it was a well-known fact... that a group of foreign diplomats were visiting Batticaloa." He did not explain the obvious contradiction in his statement: if it was such "a well-known fact," what were the "security reasons" for not informing the LTTE?

LTTE military spokesman Rasiyah Ilanthirayan immediately expressed "deep regret" over the incident and blamed the military for failing to inform it of the visit. He explained that the LTTE ceased fire immediately when told by UN official Marian Din of the presence of foreign diplomats in the area. He claimed that the LTTE had been responding to an army artillery barrage that morning.

The LTTE certainly had nothing to gain by attacking members of an international delegation. In fact, the LTTE leadership has been desperately seeking to placate the so-called international community in a bid to ease its increasingly isolation. Any deaths or serious injuries would have played directly into the hands of the Colombo government, which has been pressing for harsher measures against the LTTE.

The US-based Stratfor think tank commented: "The Sri Lankan government accused the Tigers [LTTE] of targetting civilians, though the Tigers have said they did not know the foreign diplomats were present. In either case, the Tigers have raised their profile and given the Sri Lankan government a better chance to elicit greater military aid and support from Washington and the European Union to counter the rebels."

It cannot be ruled out that the Sri Lankan military deliberately put the delegation in the line of fire. An article in yesterday's Colombo-based *Daily Mirror* noted that an army camp two kilometres from the landing site had come under mortar attack just half an hour before the helicopters landed. "So there was definitely a security threat and the helicopters should

have been redirected to a safer location,” a defence source told the newspaper.

The government and its political allies have seized on the incident. Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama called upon “the international community to support the endeavours of the government of Sri Lanka to address the scourge of terrorism and to pressure the LTTE to give up terrorism and return to the democratic fold”. He appealed for “effective measures to eliminate fund raising and weapon procurement by the LTTE in foreign countries”.

The international response has been muted. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon condemned “the total disregard for the lives of civilians, humanitarian workers, government officials, and the international community” but at the same time appealed for a return to peace talks. The European Union and other countries issued similar statements. The US State Department said it was unlikely that the ambassadors had been specifically targeted.

The Sri Lankan military immediately launched a retaliatory air strike on the LTTE-held area of Vavunathivu, near Batticaloa. The military claimed that the artillery fire on the international delegation had come from the area. On Wednesday, the navy raided a major LTTE Sea Tiger base near Mullaitivu. On Thursday, the air force bombed an alleged LTTE training camp, also in the Mullaitivu district.

The Batticaloa incident took place five days after the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Sri Lankan ceasefire agreement (CFA). A statement issued by Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which formally oversees the ceasefire, underscores the fact that the responsibility for the CFA’s breakdown rests squarely with President Mahinda Rajapakse, who narrowly won office in November 2005.

In the three years before November 2005, the SLMM recorded that just 130 people died in clashes and other incidents involving the LTTE and the security forces. In the past 15 months, at least 4,000 civilians, military and police personnel, and LTTE fighters have been killed in the escalating civil war.

The government’s so-called peace secretariat issued a statement absurdly declaring that the government had not abandoned the ceasefire. At the same time, it defended “the government’s continued efforts to maintain the rule of law and ensure that the human

rights of all citizens of the country are respected. The government is committed to striving to make this possible again in the areas currently controlled by the LTTE, where the rights of the people are gravely violated by the LTTE.”

Obviously, the government’s only means of supposedly ensuring that “human rights” and the “rule of law” are observed in LTTE-held areas is to drive out the LTTE. In other words, in the name of “human rights,” Rajapakse has ordered military offensives, in breach of the ceasefire, that have killed hundreds and driven tens of thousands of civilians from their homes. In the name of defending the “rule of law,” the government has enacted draconian legislation allowing for arbitrary detention without trial and turned a blind eye to the operation of military-backed death squads that terrorise the island’s Tamil minority.

In comments on TV last Sunday, Rajapakse dispensed with the double-talk. The president bluntly stated he was not going to “bother about the CFA, as it is not an obstacle”. It was a declaration that the government is preparing to plunge the country deeper in the quagmire of communal war.



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