

Sri Lanka: LTTE mounts second air attack as government forces intensify offensive

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out a second air attack in just over a month, hitting the Sri Lankan military's main complex in the northern Jaffna peninsula at Palaly late on Monday night. Palaly is the main northern air base and thus a major supply route for the military, which has no road access to the south of the island.

The defence ministry at first denied any LTTE air attack. But army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka later admitted that the assault had killed six soldiers and wounded several others. He said that when the Palaly base activated its anti-aircraft guns, the LTTE aircraft changed course and dropped their bombs on a nearby army detachment.

LTTE military spokesman Irasiah Ilanthirayan claimed that it had inflicted heavy casualties on the base. Last month the LTTE caught the Sri Lankan military by surprise by bombing the Katunayaka air force base near the country's international airport, 40 kilometres north of Colombo. Both air raids involved small, light aircraft which are no match for the Sri Lankan airforce, and capable of inflicting only relatively minor damage.

For the LTTE, the air strike is a rather desperate attempt to boost morale. Its forces are being hard pressed by the Sri Lankan military, particularly in the East of the island, where it has lost significant territory. The army has declared it is engaged in a "final push" to seize control of the LTTE's remaining eastern areas.

By April 11, government troops had ended 14 years of LTTE control of the Mahaoya-Chenkalady section of the main road from Colombo to the eastern district of Batticaloa. Since the government gave the go-ahead last July for offensive operations in breach of the 2002 ceasefire, the army has seized the areas of Mavilaru, Sampur and Vaharai in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa

districts.

Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe recently boasted that the military had the LTTE confined in the East to a jungle area of just 150 square kilometres around Thoppigala. President Mahinda Rajapakse declared in early March that the security forces would capture all LTTE-held areas in the east by mid-April.

While forced to retreat, the LTTE fighters are harassing government troops in recently captured areas. An article in last weekend's *Sunday Times* concluded: "The LTTE, it has become clear, has left a considerable presence in the East to keep the troops under check whilst drawing out most of its cadres to the North to meet a Security Forces offensive."

The military, however, is already turning its attention to the LTTE's northern strongholds. The military reported on Monday that the air force carried out attacks on Nagarkovil, south of Jaffna, "causing heavy damage". Last week its warplanes attacked LTTE-held areas in the Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi districts. Ground assaults took place in the Mannar and Omanthai areas, in which at least eight soldiers died.

The government's contempt for the 2002 ceasefire was expressed by defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse in an Associated Press interview on April 12. "There is no cease-fire agreement (CFA). There is no meaning in that," he said. The only reason the government had not officially abrogated it, he said, was "probably to keep the international community happy".

In the same interview, the defence secretary indicated that the offensives would continue. Asked if the military planned to push into the LTTE's northern stronghold in the Wannai areas, he promptly replied: "Definitively".

The top defence ministry bureaucrat, who is also the

president's brother, was simply stating what has been evident for some time. Mahinda Rajapakse narrowly won the November 2005 president election with the backing of Sinhala chauvinist parties on an aggressive platform that insisted on revisions to the 2002 ceasefire. His victory gave the green light to the military and associated paramilitaries to conduct a murky war of murder and provocation against the LTTE.

Last July, the president gave the go-ahead for a military offensive to seize LTTE territory in the Mavilaru area. The US and other countries that oversee the so-called international peace process have tacitly supported the government's renewed war. While periodically calling for both sides to resume talks, none of the major powers has criticised Colombo's naked ceasefire breaches.

Not surprisingly, there has been no international condemnation of Gotabhaya Rajapakse's latest statement. In fact, the European Union indicated its bias by voting on Monday for the second time to keep the LTTE on its list of banned terrorist organisations.

In another move on Monday, the government demonstrated that it is not the slightest interested in serious peace talks. It called on Norway's ambassador to Sri Lanka, Hans Brattskar, and his delegation to cancel their planned trip to the LTTE-held town of Kilinochchi. While "security" was given as the excuse, the real reason was to block Norwegian attempts to explore avenues to restart negotiations. Sinhala extremists have repeatedly denounced Norway—the formal facilitator of the "peace process"—as "pro-LTTE".

In response to the latest fighting, LTTE political wing leader S. P. Thamichelvan issued another futile and pathetic appeal to the major powers to pressure Colombo to restart peace talks. "There is place yet for the international community to act on this and for negotiations to restart... It is only because we have faith in that, we haven't shown our reaction to all what is being done by the government," he said.

As it intensifies its communalist war, the government is intensifying its attacks on the democratic rights and living standards of ordinary working people.

There is widespread popular opposition to the war and its economic burdens. Government debt jumped by 16 percent last year as a result of rising defence spending, which has reached 8 percent of gross

domestic product (GDP). The inflation rate of around 20 percent is impacting sharply on ordinary people, particularly the urban and rural poor.

The Rajapakse government has responded to growing popular opposition with a series of sharp attacks on basic rights. Last year, it reimposed the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, which provides for the detention without charge of "terrorism suspects". On April 6, President Rajapakse used his emergency powers to confer police powers on the armed forces in 25 districts throughout the country.



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