

LTTE overruns naval outpost on key Sri Lankan island

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A significant attack on the Sri Lankan security forces last Thursday has again demonstrated that the government's renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will inevitably be drawn out and bloody. Concerned over widespread popular opposition to the conflict, the military played down the incident and issued false casualty figures to the media.

The LTTE launched a pre-dawn raid on the island of Delft, which is strategically placed off the country's northwest coast, just 30 kilometres from Rameshwaram in southern India. LTTE spokesman Rasaiah Ilanthirayan claimed that the Sea Tigers overran a navy camp, killing about 35 naval personnel and destroying or damaging several naval vessels. The LTTE also attacked reinforcements rushed to the island, before withdrawing. Ilanthirayan stated that four LTTE fighters had been killed.

According to last weekend's *Sunday Times*, the naval detachment was guarding a radar installation set up six months ago to monitor LTTE movements at sea and the smuggling of arms into Sri Lanka. The guerrillas made off with a cache of arms, including automatic rifles, heavy calibre machine guns and a rocket propelled grenade launcher.

The government's Media Centre of National Security (MCNS), which closely manages all military reportage, stridently denied the LTTE claim, declaring that the navy had repulsed the attack, killing 18 LTTE members. It is impossible to independently verify exact numbers, but the *Sunday Times* made clear that the military was trying to minimise an embarrassing setback.

"Faster than the speed of bullets fired by reinforcements to retake the radar facility, the casualty counts were changing. At one point, officials at the

MCNS said sailors who took over the island had seen six bodies of sailors lying in the area. It later rose to seven. Then suddenly apologetic MCNS officials explained they were under orders from top brass at navy headquarters to give a lower casualty count. Strange but true that meant that some of those found dead had been resurrected by the top brass. They declared that only four sailors had died and four more were wounded," the newspaper's Iqbal Athas wrote.

The *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Leader* verified that at least eight naval personnel had died and three more were wounded in the clash. After retaking the post, a panicked military imposed a curfew on Delft and adjoining islands and launched search operations in the area. All ferry services to Delft, which has a local population of about 6,000 fishing families, have been curtailed.

The misinformation about the incident reveals just how sensitive the military and the government are to reports of any reversals and of large numbers of casualties. President Mahinda Rajapakse, who narrowly won office at the 2005 election, is fearful that any defeat could lead to a rapid deterioration of morale in the security forces and the eruption of popular opposition to the war.

Rajapakse ordered the army onto the offensive last July in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement with the LTTE. Since then the army has seized LTTE-held territory in the East of Sri Lanka, including the areas of Mavilaru, Sampur and Vaharai. The last substantial LTTE held territory in the East—Thoppigala—is also under attack. The successes have been dependent on two main factors: a debilitating split in the eastern wing of the LTTE in 2004, and the willingness of the military to make heavy use of its air superiority and artillery, including against civilian

areas.

While the previous focus has been in the East, the Sri Lankan military is shifting the theatre of war to the North. It has already launched numerous probing operations, including the extensive bombing of LTTE areas. The scale of these attacks is underscored by the announcement on May 20 by Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe that the military had killed more than 500 LTTE rebels in four months in the northern areas of Mannar and Vavuniya. The figure is undoubtedly exaggerated, but does indicate the new targeted areas. The military is yet to make any significant inroad into LTTE territory in the North.

The Rajapakse government has virtually dropped all pretences that the military is engaged in “humanitarian” or “defensive” operations. Rajapakse is on record as declaring that his so-called war on terrorism will continue until the LTTE lays down its arms. His brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is the secretary of the defence ministry, has publicly declared that the 2002 ceasefire agreement has no meaning.

The scope of the renewed war was elaborated by the annual Amnesty International report for 2006 released on Friday. Up until the end of the year, 215,000 people in the North and East had been displaced, with at least 10,000 fleeing to southern India. The organisation estimated that about 5,000 people were killed in conflict-related violence, including about 3,000 civilians. The report also pointed to the government’s appalling abuse of democratic rights, and a reemerging “a pattern of enforced disappearances” in the North and East.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) withdrew its staff last Wednesday from the checkpoints between government- and LTTE-held areas due to escalating attacks. In particular, ICRC observers monitor the movement of goods and civilians into the northern LTTE-held Wanni area. The army closed the Uylankulam entry point on May 18 and the Omanthai checkpoint last week, accusing the LTTE of carrying out attacks. The ICRC warned last Friday that the decision would create a food crisis in the Wanni, but such a shortage is precisely why the military has imposed its de facto blockade.

The LTTE’s attack on Delft Island, along with recent bombing raids by light aircraft, was an attempt to bolster morale in its own ranks and put the military

under pressure. Along with these small-scale military operations, the LTTE has issued futile appeals to the “international community” to restart the so-called international peace process. In an interview with the *Tamilnet* web site on May 20, LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamichelvan tacitly acknowledged that the major powers were effectively backing Rajapakse’s war, but nevertheless issued another plea for more balance.

There is no sign that the Rajapakse government is interested in a compromise. The president informed cabinet last Wednesday that the government is purchasing four more multi-role MiG-29 warplanes, along with a trainer aircraft. The *Sunday Times* reported that the military is also buying three Mi-35M helicopters, upgrading four Mi-24 helicopters and expanding its capacity to maintain its helicopter fleet. “As billions worth of military equipment is being procured, this time through an exclusive state company chaired by Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the cost of war is soaring,” the article stated.

However, last week’s attack on Delft demonstrates that despite the military’s improved hardware, the LTTE still has substantial military capacity. Even if the Sri Lankan armed forces were capable of dealing a knockout military blow against the LTTE, however, which is obviously what the government is counting on, it is completely incapable of resolving the underlying political and social contradictions that led to the protracted 24-year communal war in the first place.



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