

Heavy fighting continues in the North and East of Sri Lanka

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The Sri Lankan government still maintains the fiction that it is adhering the 2002 ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But in the North and East of the island, the security forces are waging a ruthless war of aggression aimed at destroying the separatist guerrilla movement and capturing LTTE territory, with no regard for ceasefire lines.

Fierce battles have taken place over the past fortnight. In the East, the army is attempting to capture the LTTE's last significant stronghold—the area of Thoppigala. Since last July, military has driven the LTTE out of the eastern regions of Mavilaru, Sampur and Vaharai displacing an estimated 250,000 people.

Last Friday the military announced the capture of four of the LTTE's forward defence lines in the Thoppigala jungle. Speaking to the *Island* on Monday, Army Commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka boasted that the security forces would control the entire area within days. At least two soldiers and 10 LTTE fighters have died in the encounters.

Having secured large areas of the East, the military has also begun probing operations against LTTE bases in the North, provoking retaliatory raids. Heavy fighting took place on the northern frontlines near Omanthai and Pampaimadu during the first three days of June, as the LTTE sought to neutralise long-range artillery which the army has put in place.

The LTTE claimed to have destroyed four or five artillery positions as well as capturing military hardware, including an armoured personnel carrier. It displaced a photograph of the captured vehicle and said that at least 30 soldiers had been killed in the five-hour battle. The military insisted that government troops had beaten back the LTTE attacks and downplayed the casualty figures.

Sunday Times reported that at least 15 soldiers were killed as well as another 24 listed as missing in action. A further 82 soldiers were wounded, of whom 52 were hospitalised. The LTTE handed over some of the bodies via the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), but later announced the cremation of some bodies that the army had refused to accept.

The military, which heavily censors reports of any fighting, is particularly sensitive to any news of reversals or high casualty figures as the war is deeply unpopular throughout the country. Most of the ranks of the army are economic conscripts—youth from poor rural families who have no alternative but to join the armed forces to secure a wage.

Speaking to Reuters on June 4, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama again repeated the lie that the government intended to maintain the ceasefire agreement. “I categorically state that there is no decision to abrogate the CFA,” he said, adding that the government was “encouraging” the LTTE to reengage in internationally-brokered talks.

Bogollagama's comments are largely aimed at the so-called international community, which by choosing to ignore the Sri Lankan military offensives is providing its tacit support. The US, Japan and the European powers can only maintain their pretence of being even-handed, if the Colombo government continues its pretence of adhering to the ceasefire and being willing to negotiate.

Last week, Japan's special envoy Yasushi Akashi visited Colombo and met with government and opposition leaders. While expressing limited concerns about human rights violations in Sri Lanka, he once again endorsed the fiction that the government was intent on peace. “[T]here is commitment still for the peace process and the determination of President

[Mahinda] Rajapakse to seek a settlement through political means is unchanged,” he told the media.

The Sri Lankan military has no use for such falsehoods. On June 4, the same day as Bogollagama’s remarks, General Fonseka bluntly told the *Daily News* that the army was not restrained by the ceasefire agreement. “There is no ceasefire today, there is fighting,” he said. Ignoring the fact that the army has repeatedly overrun LTTE territory, Fonseka insisted that the military’s actions were defensive. “Military defences, high security zones in the North are being threatened by the LTTE,” he declared, and the military has to “ensure the security and safety of those establishments”.

There is no doubt that the government is preparing to intensify the war. *Jane’s Defence Weekly* revealed last week that Sri Lanka signed a major deal with China’s Poly Technologies in April to purchase new arms and ammunition. It includes 70,000 120 mm motor shells, 68,000 rounds of 152 mm artillery shells and 50,000 81 mm high-explosive mortar bombs. The navy has ordered 100,000 14.5 mm cartridges, 2,000 RPG-7 rockets and 500 81 mm airburst mortar shells, as well as a range of new naval guns, hundreds of heavy machine guns and thousands of submachine guns.

To counter the LTTE’s recent use of light aircraft to carry out limited bombing raids, the government has also turned to China to upgrade air defences. The military is spending \$US5 million to purchase JY 11 3D radar from China National Electronics Import Export Corp over next few weeks and is planning to buy three mobile radar units from the same firm. In a separate deal, the airforce is proposing to buy MiG 29 fighter planes from Ukraine.

According to the *Sunday Leader*, Rajapakse told his ministers during a cabinet meeting last week not to recruit new staff and to “manage” their budget allocations more carefully. In other words, to pay for the war, government spending in all other areas, including essential services such as health, education and welfare, will have to be cut back.

Rajapakse also announced a new recruitment drive for more than 50,000 more soldiers. In part, the recruitment campaign is to replace the hundreds of troops who have been killed over the past year as well as the many more who have deserted. However, the main purpose of this expansion is to prosecute and

extend the communal war that the government has no intention of ending through a negotiated peace.

Those who will be forced to pay the price will be working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike.



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