Sri Lanka: Military offensive used to clear eastern Special Economic Zone

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In an unprecedented move, the Sri Lankan government has created a High Security Zone (HSZ) around a new Special Economic Zone at Sampur and Muttur East in the eastern district of Trincomalee. The area was held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) before being seized by the military last September in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement.

The latest decision has exposed all the lies used to justify the offensive. Whatever the military logic, the action was aimed at grabbing land and turning it into a secure area for investors, domestic and foreign, to exploit cheap local labour. Sampur lies on the southern side of the strategic deep-water harbour of Trincomalee.

The presidential gazette notification creating the HSZ was dated May 30 but only became public knowledge in mid-June. President Mahinda Rajapakse appointed eastern army commander, Major General Parakrama Pannipitiya, as the Competent Authority to control the area. The HSZ covers 14 villages inhabited mainly by Tamils, as well as all surrounding waters.

Muttur East and Sampur were among the first areas targetted after President Rajapakse ordered the army onto the offensive last July. The military top brass and sections of the Colombo press had repeatedly warned that LTTE artillery could threaten the Trincomalee naval base from its positions in Sampur—even though under the 2002 ceasefire no attacks had taken place.

Significantly, the government had already allocated 675 square kilometres to establish a Special Economic Zone in February 2006 even though the area had not been "cleared" of LTTE fighters. The minister in charge of the Board of Investment (BOI) even set up an office at China Bay in Trincomalee port to facilitate investment.

The military offensive last August and September has since cleared the area not only of LTTE fighters but much of the population. Tens of thousands of civilians were displaced during the heavy fighting and have joined hundreds of thousands of others in squalid refugee camps in the Batticaloa district. Now they will be prevented from returning to their homes and land.

According to the HSZ regulations, no person, boat or vessel can enter the area without written permission from the Competent Authority and his delegated officers. Any person, boat or vessel that fails to obey the military's orders can be fired upon and taken into custody. No insurance or compensation will be paid in any cases of death, injury or damage caused by the military. Anyone convicted of contravening the regulations faces a prison term of between three months and five years, as well as a fine of not less than 500,000 rupees ($US4,490) and forfeiture of their seized property.

Since civil war erupted in 1983, the military has established extensive HSZs in the North and East around its installations, expelling hundreds of thousands of Tamils from their homes and land. On the Jaffna peninsula alone, 15 HSZs have been established covering 180 square kilometres. In the East, several HSZs have been created in and around military complexes and camps. This is the first time, however, that a HSZ has been established to protect business interests.

Tamil organisations have condemned the decision as a form of ethnic cleansing. Evicting Tamils from their land is a particularly sensitive issue. Successive Colombo governments in the past have expelled Tamils from various areas, particularly in the East, to make way for settlements of impoverished Sinhala farmers. The discriminatory policy is one of the sources of

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tension that led to the war in the first place.

In a letter to President Rajapakse, R. Sambandan, the leader of the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), declared that the move amounted to removing the "birth rights" of Tamils. He accused the government of attempting to further change the demographic structure in the district and appealed for the decision to be reversed.

One refugee told the BBC last month: "There are over one hundred tanks [water reservoirs] and thousands of villagers' lands in the area. We have our kovils [Hindu temples] numbering over twenty. It is even difficult to think of leaving our villages and settling in a different place. We humbly beg the government to give back our lands and resettle all of us. If not, we are prepared to sacrifice anything in the struggle for our rights."

Another villager told the BBC that the displaced did not want assistance from the government, but to be permitted to go back to their villages. "For God's sake please allow us to settle in our villages," she said.

In comments to the *Hindustan Times*, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella admitted that civilians would not be allowed back into the HSZ, cynically declaring that it was "both for their own security and the security of the vital establishments to come up there".

Rambukwella also acknowledged that the government was to invite investors into the SEZ but defended the move, saying: "Economic development schemes sometimes require the resettlement of populations. Earlier, the Mahaweli irrigation scheme in South Sri Lanka had displaced thousands, but no one objected to that!"

What Rambukwella omitted to point out was that there was no precedent for using the military to clear an area for economic development, forcing people out at the point of a gun. In the case of the Mahaweli irrigation scheme in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which displaced tens of thousands, the United National Party government faced widespread protests and was forced to grant land and compensation.

The establishment of an SEZ in Sampur and Muttur East is part of broader government plans. In handing down the budget last November, President Rajapakse declared: "The government is committed to build a Northern expressway and several other main roads and bridges in districts in the North and East to promote Trincomalee as an investment and tourism zone.

"The urban development authority and the board of investment have already finalised an infrastructure development plan for Trincomalee as an investment and tourist zone and will provide risk guarantees, tax exemptions, foreign exchange and other incentives to attract investments. Trincomalee harbour will be used for activities associated with domestic commercial cargo to ease the pressure of Colombo Fort."

Last December the Lanka Electricity Board signed an agreement with the Indian Ministry of Power and Energy to establish a $US350 million coal-fired power plant in the recaptured Sampur area. The announcement triggered widespread protests, forcing the Indian government to postpone a final decision on the site. The new power plant is obviously a central component of plans to establish other industries in the Trincomalee district.

The latest announcement again makes clear that Rajapakse's renewed war has nothing to do with the interests of working people—Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim—but is designed to advance the agenda of the island's ruling elites.

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