

Sri Lankan military intensifies offensive in the East

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The Sri Lankan government has ignored concerns expressed by the recent meeting of the Co-Chairs of the Sri Lankan Donors Conference—the US, EU, Japan and Norway—and is continuing offensive operations to destroy the last eastern major base of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is planning a major "national celebration" to coincide with the anniversary of the first military offensive against the LTTE in the Mavilaru area last July 26. It is also preparing to inaugurate a grandiose economic development plan known as *Negenahira Neguma* or the Rising of the East. The military is under pressure to complete the seizure of the Thoppigala area so that the government can boast about "liberating" the East.

The campaign of patriotic propaganda and empty economic promises is designed to drown out rising opposition to the war and worsening living standards. The government's year of open military aggression has resulted in the deaths of at least 1,500 and the displacement of more than 250,000. Hundreds of people have been assassinated or "disappeared" by military-backed death squads. Prices of essential items are continuing to skyrocket, producing discontent and anger.

A survey in last weekend's *Sunday Times* found that support for the government was rapidly eroding. "Most of those covered by the survey complained of unbearable economic burdens. There were also those who staunchly backed the ongoing military campaign against Tiger guerrillas but now had shifted their views. They claimed they were not being given a correct picture and the war was being used as a tool to cover the mounting hardships imposed on them. Significant enough, some of the state intelligence agencies' findings after their own surveys concurred with the same view," the article stated.

The Co-Chairs of the international peace process met in Oslo on June 26 to assess the situation in Sri Lanka and,

for the first time since the body was formed in 2002, issued no official statement. According to the *Sunday Times* of July 1, the meeting discussed the security and political situation in Sri Lanka, human rights, the displaced and abductions and was "deeply critical of the way the government handled the issues," while also making criticisms of the LTTE.

According to the newspaper, the Co-Chairs were to brief both sides on their deliberations, but even this limited step immediately ran into obstacles when it was reported that the government had agreed to allow Norwegian peace envoy Jon Hanssen Bauer to visit the LTTE leadership. Sinhala extremist parties, which have previously denounced Norway as pro-LTTE, immediately began a campaign against the visit. JVP MP Wimal Weerawansa accused the Norwegian peace mediators of planning to go to Kilinochchi to support the LTTE. The Norwegian embassy later denied the visit would take place.

Far from being pro-LTTE, the Co-Chairs have turned a blind eye to the government's open flouting of the 2002 ceasefire agreement by launching repeated military offensives to seize LTTE territory. The major powers have also done nothing to halt the flagrant abuse of basic democratic rights by the Sri Lankan government and military. If criticisms are now being made, it is out of concern that Rajapakse's reckless drive for a military victory over the LTTE will only lead to greater political and social instability in Sri Lanka and the broader region.

According to the *Sunday Times* report, the Co-Chairs called for a political package to address the genuine grievances of the Tamil minority. The meeting was critical of the proposals by Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party for district level devolution, saying they could not be considered "credible". The comments are a tacit recognition that the government has no interest in negotiating in good faith or addressing the decades of anti-

Tamil discrimination that first led to the war. The SLFP's proposal for a devolution of power only at the district levels effectively tears up the basis for the negotiations that followed the 2002 ceasefire as well as all previous attempts to find a negotiated end to the war.

While Rajapakse still tries to posture as a man of peace, his government is seeking to crush the LTTE militarily. Since last July, the army has captured key areas of the East including Mavilaru, Muttur east, Sampur and Vaharai. On June 8, the latest assault began on the LTTE's stronghold at Thoppigala in jungle terrain 40 kilometres west of Batticaloa.

Due to tight military censorship, there is no independent reporting of the fighting. Last Friday and Saturday, the military claimed to have killed 15 LTTE fighters and defeated the LTTE in a sea battle. On Monday, the army took journalists to captured areas. A top army commander told the Associated Press that the operation would be concluded by the end of July, placing the entire eastern province under government control for the first time since 1993. Ground commanders claim to have killed 444 LTTE fighters during the Thoppigala operation for the loss of only 20 soldiers and two officers.

Despite its denials, the military is collaborating closely with the Karuna group, also known as the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), which split from the LTTE in 2004. According to the *Sunday Times*, TMVP guerillas have been attacking LTTE positions south of the Thoppigala area, ensuring that the LTTE could not bring up reinforcements.

The military has also intensified its attacks in the north. On Tuesday, one of the military's deep penetration teams triggered a claymore mine in LTTE-held Mankulam, killing five members of a medical team, including LTTE cadres. The air force has continued intermittent attacks in the LTTE-held Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu areas. Setting out the government's agenda, Rajapakse declared on July 9: "To bring about permanent peace to this country, the government is dedicated to chasing out the terrorists from the Northern Province soon, like they were chased out from the Eastern Province".

The government is already beginning to spell out what its "peace" will mean. In the same speech, Rajapakse said he "was planning to bring in many foreign investors to develop the Eastern Province since the government was very keen to inaugurate many industries in the East to alleviate the rural poverty and solve their unemployment, a problem untouched by any government over a decade".

Far from ending poverty and unemployment, the

government is preparing to transform large parts of the East into cheap labour zones for investors. In May, Rajapakse formally declared a High Security Zone (HSZ) encompassing large parts of Muttur East and Sampur captured from the LTTE last year. The HSZ will include a large Special Economic Zone for local and foreign business and will prevent thousands of villagers who have fled the area from returning.

At the same time, the government is preparing for a police buildup throughout the East. According to the Inspector General of Police Victor Perera, 2 new police stations and 25 new police posts will be established in the Batticaloa district. In Trincomalee, an additional 5 police stations and 9 police posts are to be set up. In Ampara district, 2 new police stations and 8 police posts will be established. The Special Task Force (STF)—heavily armed police commandos—has already established new 33 camps in the East after recent military operations.

Perera said a special recruitment drive was underway to be completed by October. The police recruits are additional to the military's plans to recruit 50,000 more personnel. According to the *Island*: "Military and police officials asserted that the deployment of police and its paramilitary wing (STF) in the East would free the SLA [Sri Lankan Army] for operations in the Wanni region...This was part of our strategy".

What is underway is a massive expansion of the security forces to transform the "liberated" areas of the East and North into a vast prison camp. Inevitably, it will also be directed at suppressing the growing opposition elsewhere on the island to the war, the destruction of basic democratic rights and the continuing erosion of the living standards of working people.



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