

Sri Lankan military launches northern offensive against LTTE

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A new operation launched by the Sri Lankan military on September 1 to seize a strip of land on the northwestern coast of the island marks a further intensification of the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Having seized most of the East in a series of offensives beginning in July 2006, the army is moving against the LTTE's remaining strongholds in the North.

The military has already conducted several probing operations from the Vavuniya-Mannar road into the LTTE-held Wanni. On June 2, for instance, two army divisions launched a limited operation to capture LTTE-held territory near Omathai and Pompaimadu, but were beaten back. At least 30 soldiers were killed and 82 wounded in a LTTE counterattack that destroyed four artillery positions and captured military hardware.

In the latest assault, the military captured Silavaturai, located to the south of Mannar in the northern province, as well as several adjoining fishing villages, including Arippu, Kondachchi and Mullikulam. The army encountered little resistance as the area is cut off from the main northern LTTE bases in the Wanni. Most of the population is Tamil, along with several hundred Muslims.

Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe boasted that the offensive had seized the LTTE's main transit base for offloading weapons smuggled by sea to Sri Lanka. He claimed that the army had inflicted "heavy casualties" on the LTTE, but gave no figures. In all likelihood, the LTTE abandoned the villages, which are surrounded by military-controlled areas and difficult to defend.

The government and the military keep up the pretence that the operations are "defensive" and "humanitarian", but the unstated goals of seizing LTTE territory in violation of the 2002 ceasefire and militarily destroying

the LTTE are barely concealed. As in the case of previous offensives, the military launched its operation with sustained artillery barrages and the use of multi-barrel rocket launchers. Thousands of displaced people are now being housed in two refugee camps at Murunkan and Nanattan.

A vanload of refugees fleeing from the fighting was hit by a claymore bomb. Nine people died on the spot and four more died of their wounds later. The LTTE accused one of the military's long-range units of planting the bomb to sow terror and confusion in the area. The military denied the accusation and blamed the LTTE, but did not explain why the LTTE would want to kill local Tamils.

Naval spokesman D.K.P. Dissanayake identified the longer-term objectives in seizing the coastal strip. He announced that the navy would set up two bases to strengthen the military's presence and protect the government's projects. Pointing to the area's economic potential, he added: "The establishment of navy camps in Mullikulam and Silavaturai will help provide much needed security for oil exploration in the Gulf of Mannar region."

Speaking to the press on September 3, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella played down suggestions that the government was preparing for a "major military offensive." At the same time, he declared: "Our target is to liberate Tamil people from the LTTE. As we do this, the process can be termed as an offensive or whatever, but that doesn't mean the doors for peace talks are closed."

Rambukwella made absolutely clear that the government no longer recognises the basis of the 2002 ceasefire, which demarcated government and LTTE-held areas. "There were no land areas that belonged to the LTTE although demarcated in the CFA [Cease Fire

Agreement]. What existed was a temporary measure, as all areas belonged to the government and people of Sri Lanka,” he stated.

His talk of “liberating the Tamil people” is absurd. While the LTTE certainly resorts to anti-democratic methods to maintain its control over Tamils, the Rajapakse government is based on Sinhala supremacism and treats the Tamil minority as a whole as the enemy. In “liberated” areas in the East, the security forces have imposed what amounts to military rule, complete with High Security Zones to protect new economic projects and attract investors.

On August 30, Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama declared in Malaysia that the government had no plans to launch an offensive in the North. Speaking to Reuters, he emphasised: “We want the LTTE to return to the negotiation table.” He said the government was seeking to present proposals for a political solution to the war to an all-party committee on the constitution.

All this double talk serves a definite political purpose. While the government is intent on destroying the LTTE militarily, President Mahinda Rajapakse maintains the fiction of abiding by the international peace process. This threadbare ruse is sufficient to allow the US and other major powers to turn a blind eye to his new war of aggression.

The government is also facing growing domestic opposition. An opinion poll conducted in June by the Policy Alternatives reported that 70 percent of all communities, including 53 percent of Sinhalese, preferred “peace talks” to end the war. Sharp increases in military spending have led to cutbacks to social spending and subsidies and rising prices, all of which is fuelling widespread discontent.

The government has made clear that the war will continue regardless of the economic impact. Defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, told a military passing out parade on August 26: “The government is determined to liberate the remainder of the un-cleared areas in the Wanni from the clutches of LTTE the same way it liberated the East...The military actions will not be averted as a result of the ever increasing cost of living.”

Army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka was just as blunt in remarks to the *Los Angeles Times* on August 15, saying: “Ending up with a bankrupt

country is better than ending up with half a country. If you want to beat the enemy and save the country, you have to make a few sacrifices.” He warned that the LTTE would fight in the North because they will “be pushed to the wall and have no place to run”. He said the military was seeking to recruit an additional 20,000 soldiers.

Even more burdens will be placed on working people. Since the Rajapakse government restarted the war last year, more than 5,000 people have been killed. Hundreds more have “disappeared” or been murdered by death squads operated by the military or associated paramilitary groups. Another 200,000 have been displaced by the fighting. Most are living in squalid refugee camps without adequate food, shelter and services. Any full-scale offensive into the LTTE-held areas of the Wanni will only create further humanitarian disasters.



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