

Sri Lankan military intensifies drive against LTTE

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11 October 2007

Over recent weeks, Sri Lankan security forces have engaged in escalating air, ground and naval attacks against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in preparation for a major thrust into the separatist organisation's northern strongholds. After seizing the LTTE-held areas in the eastern province, ministers, defence officials and generals have reiterated their intention to destroy the LTTE's military capacity.

The military's aggressive actions make a mockery of government claims that it still abides by the 2002 ceasefire and is engaged in purely "defensive" operations. Last Sunday, the navy sank an LTTE cargo vessel, the Matsuseema, in international waters about 1,700 kilometres from the southern tip of Sri Lanka, killing all 15 people on board. A navy spokesman claimed that the ship was carrying military hardware, including communication equipment, radars, high-powered outboard motors and jet skis.

According to the Sri Lankan navy, the Matsuseema was the seventh ship sunk this year and the last of the LTTE's cargo vessels. Last month, the government announced that three LTTE ships carrying military equipment had been sunk—again in international waters some 1,400 kilometres from the island. An estimated 40-45 people were killed. There is no indication that the navy attempted to stop, search or capture the vessels before opening fire.

Euphoric over the victory, the government held a ceremony on September 17 to hail the sailors involved in the one-sided naval encounter. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, declared: "We are ready to defeat terrorism using military power rather than depending on a political solution which we find difficult to reach right now." His comments are one more demonstration that the government has no intention of returning to peace

talks.

The military is also continuing land and air operations. The air force has carried out strikes on the LTTE's northern strongholds, including near the town of Killinochchi, where the LTTE leadership is based.

On September 25, war planes bombed Pooneryn on the northwestern coast, the site of a Sea Tiger base. On September 29, Vallipunam in the Mullaithivu district was heavily bombed. The government claimed to have hit a rebel training camp but the LTTE accused the air force of targeting civilian settlements. On October 2, the air force used Kfir jets to strafe Visvamadu, near Kilinochchi. Again the LTTE alleged that six civilian areas had been struck.

The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which still oversees the non-existent ceasefire, has noted regular small-scale ground skirmishes. Its report for September 24-30 stated that shelling had continued on a daily basis from Pompamaiju, near the northern town of Vavuniya, through to Murunkan on the Mannar road.

In the last week of September, the armed forces launched attacks on two fronts—from Mannar on the northwestern coast and from Omanthai near Vavuniya—and met heavy LTTE resistance. According to official figures, two soldiers were killed and another 20 were injured, but the *Sunday Times* reported that the real casualty figures were much higher.

Further fighting took place last week. *Lakbimanews* reported that three soldiers had been killed and 25 wounded, one seriously, last Wednesday and Thursday at Vilathikulam west of Omanthai. An army captain and another soldier went missing during a heavy mortar barrage. The LTTE later handed their bodies back to the military via the International Red Cross.

On Monday, the military claimed that four LTTE fighters were killed when they attacked a forward

defence line in Mannar. In clashes near the Kilali Lagoon in the Jaffna district, another two rebels were killed. Small-scale clashes with the LTTE occurred in the eastern district of Ampara, which the government claims to have “liberated”.

There is no doubt that the LTTE has suffered military setbacks during the past year. In the course of the country’s bloody 24-year civil war, however, the military has time and again proven incapable of destroying the LTTE. While the Rajapakse government is pressing ahead with its military adventures, sections of the ruling elite are nervous about the potential for a disaster, as well as the impact of the war on the economy and the emergence of sharp social tensions.

Writing last month in the aftermath of the navy’s sinking of three LTTE vessels, defence correspondent Iqbal Athas, who has close links to the military establishment, strongly cautioned against over-optimism. “Despite the attacks on ground, at sea and by air, Tiger guerrillas retain a military capacity. Whilst strongly acknowledging the brave role of the security forces and police to deal with them, the truth of the threats posted by the guerrillas should not be buried by heaps of propaganda. Those who do so are fooling only themselves,” he wrote in the *Sunday Times* on September 23.

In his column on September 30, Athas pointed to signs that the government’s “victory” throughout the eastern province was not as secure as claimed. As well as reporting “heavy casualties” in battles in the north, he wrote: “Though still not on a highly worrying scale, small numbers of guerrillas have become active in all three districts in the East—Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara. In Trincomalee, there have been reports of guerrilla intelligence cadres moving around the Trincomalee town and Tampalagamuwa areas.”

Athas warned that “the guerrilla activity” in the East “though small but growing, portends other serious problems”. He noted that the government and military relied quite heavily in Batticaloa district on the support of an allied Tamil paramilitary group—the so-called Karuna group headed by V. Muralitharan, which split from the LTTE in 2004, claiming the leadership was neglecting the East. Popular hostility to the Karuna group and its thuggish methods is undoubtedly growing. Even Athas reported that the outfit had been “accused of a number of killings, kidnappings and

abductions. Some of them were political whilst others were reportedly for extortion of vast amounts of money.”

The government and the military, which has already witchhunted Athas for exposing possible fraud in the purchase of MiGs from the Ukraine, immediately condemned the September 30 column. Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara declared that his information was false, designed to “sling mud at the government and security forces”. He branded Athas as “unpatriotic” and declared that “invisible hands are trying to prop up the LTTE”.

Nanayakkara’s comments reflect the hysterical chauvinist climate that has been drummed up in Colombo, not only against opponents of the war, but even those like Athas who are cautiously critical of the military strategy. As it prepares for new military offensives in the North, the government and the military are desperate to suppress the groundswell of popular opposition to the war and its impact on living standards.

The military’s offensives over the past year have relied heavily on air strikes, artillery barrages and now deep-water naval operations—all of which for a country like Sri Lanka are expensive. After hiking defence expenditure by a massive 45 percent this year, the government is preparing to boost it by another 20 percent, from 139 billion rupees (\$US 1.3 billion) to 166 billion rupees, next year.

Inevitably, ordinary working people will be forced to bear the burden in the form of rising prices, and cutbacks to public sector jobs, subsidies and services, as well as the rising toll of civilian casualties and those rendered homeless.



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