

Sri Lankan military assassinates LTTE political leader in air strike

Sarath Kumara**5 November 2007**

S.P. Thamilchelvan, the top negotiator for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was killed in a strike by the Sri Lankan air force near the northern LTTE stronghold of Kilinochchi early on Friday morning. The raid, which was based on what an air force spokesman described as “very reliable information,” also resulted in the deaths of five other senior LTTE officials.

The deliberate targetting of Thamilchelvan exposes the absurdity of the Sri Lankan government’s claims to be abiding by the 2002 ceasefire agreement and its occasional calls for a negotiated end to the country’s long-running civil war. As head of the LTTE’s political wing, Thamilchelvan had participated in or led many of the LTTE’s delegations to peace talks with the Sri Lankan government over the past five years.

Since July 2006, President Mahinda Rajapakse has unleashed a series of offensive operations to seize LTTE territory in the east of the island in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. The pretense that these were “defensive” in character was aimed at preserving the support of the major powers. The calculated killing of the LTTE’s main negotiator makes clear that the government has no intention of conducting serious negotiations and is intent on destroying the LTTE militarily.

Significantly, none of the powers that oversee the so-called international peace process—the US, the EU, Norway and Japan—has uttered a word of criticism over this blatant act of war. Last Thursday, the US ambassador to Colombo, Robert Blake, condemned a recent LTTE attack and expressed his sympathy for the families of the military personnel killed. No such statement has been issued over the death of Thamilchelvan, who was personally known by many of the diplomats involved in Sri Lankan negotiations. The silence of the major powers on the government’s action amounts to approval for its renewed war.

Thamilchelvan’s death was greeted in Colombo ruling circles with barely restrained gloating. Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara tried to justify the killing of Thamilchelvan by claiming that the LTTE’s political wing

leader had been involved in many recent military operations. Thamilchelvan, who was 40, walked with a pronounced limp after being seriously injured in a battle with the Sri Lankan military in 1993.

Nanayakkara boasted that Thamilchelvan’s death was a “moral boost” to the armed forces and would be a “great loss to the LTTE”. The air strike came less than a fortnight after LTTE guerillas infiltrated a major Sri Lankan air force base near the northern city of Anuradhapura and destroyed or damaged a number of aircraft. Even more damaging than the physical losses, the raid punctured the government’s propaganda that the military had the LTTE on the run.

Speaking on Friday evening, Rajapakse hailed the armed forces for their “optimum commitment and dedication to salvage their motherland from grave and imminent fragmentation”. While making no direct reference to the killing of Thamilchelvan, the president reiterated that the government was dedicated to an “honourable peace” and that the LTTE could not “impose conditions”. These are catch phrases for no concessions to the LTTE and therefore no negotiations.

The president’s brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, made no effort to hide his intentions. “This is just a message that we know where their leaders are. I know the locations of all the leaders ... if we want we can take them one by one,” he bragged to Reuters. He called on the LTTE leaders to “come out” without delay—in other words, to surrender unconditionally.

The Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which demands that the war be intensified, was also jubilant. JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa urged the government to openly declare the assassination as a victory for the military and the people. JVP MP Vijitha Herath described the strike as a blow to those who called for the resumption of peace talks following the Anuradhapura raid.

There was also a chorus of celebration in the Colombo press. The right-wing *Island* headlined its article on Saturday: “Air Force avenges A’pura raid, bags Tigers’ public face at dawn”. On Sunday, *Lakbima News* published a

photo of LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran paying his respects to Thamilchelvan under the title, “This time it’s him—next time...?”—in other words, urging the killing of Prabhakaran.

The opposition United National Party (UNP), which signed the 2002 ceasefire and engaged in negotiations with the LTTE—including with Thamilchelvan, is yet to issue a statement. But it is already clear that the UNP is accommodating to the government’s renewed war and inflaming of communal tensions. In comments to the *Daily Mirror*, UNP national organiser S.B. Dissanayake declared: “There should be no regret about his [Thamilchelvan’s] death.”

The LTTE responded to the killing of Thamilchelvan with its own brand of communal politics. In a statement issued Saturday, LTTE leader Prabhakaran declared: “The Sinhala nation has taken the life of a political leader deeply loved by the Tamil-speaking world and greatly respected by the international community.” Ordinary Sinhalese, however, are no more responsible for the death of Thamilchelvan than they are for the renewed war, which is opposed by the majority of working people.

Successive Colombo governments, which have exploited anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide workers and buttress their own social basis, have been directly responsible for the war since 1983. However, the LTTE’s perspective of a separate Tamil statelet represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not Tamil workers. In entering negotiations with the government in 2002, the LTTE was seeking a power-sharing arrangement that would enable the transformation of the island into a cheap labour platform for the mutual exploitation of the working class by all sections of the ruling elite.

The failure of the peace talks and return to war testifies to the organic inability of the Colombo political establishment to break from chauvinist politics. The targeted killing of Thamilchelvan is calculated to inflame communal tensions and will inevitably lead to a further escalation of the war. Rajapakse’s resort to such methods is a measure of the deep crisis confronting his government as a result of the growing discontent and opposition to the economic burdens generated by war.

A two-day strike of 200,000 public sector teachers last week was only averted at the last minute when trade union leaders capitulated to government pressure and called it off. Thousands of hospital workers stopped work last Monday and Tuesday demanding a pay rise and to protest at worsening conditions. Last Thursday, police violently broke up a demonstration by thousands of unemployed graduates.

Rising prices, in part due to the government’s massive spending on the war, are placing intolerable burdens on working people. In October, the cost of living index jumped

another 210 points to 5,723—an annualised rate of 19.3 percent as compared to 17.3 percent for September. The government has increased defence spending by 45 percent this year and plans another 20 percent rise next year. As a result, government subsidies and services, as well as the pay and conditions of public sector workers, have been slashed.

To stifle growing unrest, government ministers routinely brand protests and strikes as unpatriotic and have imposed a series of anti-democratic emergency laws. Most recently, Rajapakse proclaimed new emergency regulations on October 29 to censor any news of military deployments or activities, including the procurement of defence equipment. The measure was designed not only to suppress criticism of the war, but also scandals that have emerged over the purchase of MiG-27 fighters from the Ukraine. Following a wave of protest, the government had to revoke the regulations.

The military used the killing of Thamilchelvan to justify an immediate intensification of roadblocks, identity checks and raids, claiming that the LTTE would retaliate. On Saturday, the security forces blocked all highways leading into central Colombo and subjected all vehicles and passengers to checking. The Deputy Inspector General of Police in charge of Colombo announced that additional troops had been mobilised to tighten security in the capital.

The killing of Thamilchelvan once again underscores the enormous dangers facing the working people and the necessity of a complete break from all forms of communal politics—Sinhala chauvinism and Tamil separatism alike—and a turn to a socialist alternative to fight war, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights.



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