

Bomb blast marks formal end of Sri Lankan ceasefire agreement

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A roadside bomb tore through a bus yesterday morning, killing at least 28 people and injuring more than 60 near Buttala in the south east of Sri Lanka. No group has claimed responsibility but the government immediately blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), exploiting the tragedy to justify its decision to pull out of the 2002 ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire formally expired yesterday after the government gave two weeks notice of its withdrawal on January 2.

Buttala is close to the country's eastern province, which the government proclaimed as "liberated" last year after the military launched a series of offensives to capture LTTE-held territory. The bus was packed with villagers from the impoverished rural area. Eyewitnesses told the press that the attackers had shot passengers after the blast. While the Defence Ministry announced that a large number of schoolchildren were on the bus, local hospital officials said no children had been killed.

Several other incidents took place in quick succession. Another bomb struck an army vehicle nearby, injuring four soldiers. Minutes later armed men reportedly shot at farmers working their fields, killing at least five. Eyewitnesses said the attackers wore uniforms similar to those of the army. Fearful of further violence, people from Niyndalle, Dambeyaya and Minipura have started fleeing the area.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse denounced the bombing: "This is a brazen demonstration to the whole world of [the LTTE's] unchanged commitment to terrorism and the absolute rejection of democracy and all norms of civilised behaviour, in pursuit of its unacceptable goal of separatism, which threatens the sovereignty and integrity of Sri Lanka."

The military also seized on the blast for propaganda

purposes, posting images of the bloodstained corpses of victims on the defence ministry website. Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella blamed the LTTE for the other two incidents, claiming that LTTE fighters had been seen fleeing after shooting farmers.

Several hundred angry locals gathered near the Buttala police station after the bus bombing. Some villagers told the press they had seen suspicious persons in the adjacent jungle prior to the blast, and had informed police. They criticised the police for failing to carry out a proper search.

The LTTE, which has issued no statement to date, may have been responsible for the bus bombing. It has carried out similar atrocities in the past, particularly directed at innocent Sinhalese civilians. Its statements routinely blame the "Sinhala nation" as a whole for the crimes carried out by the security forces.

The LTTE signed the ceasefire in 2002 and renounced its demand for a separate Tamil statelet, hoping for a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government backed by the "international community". Negotiations quickly broke down and the major powers tacitly supported Rajapakse's renewed war over the past two years, refusing to criticise the military's open breach of the ceasefire. Having lost control of areas in the eastern province, the LTTE now confronts military offensives on its northern strongholds.

It is also possible that an anti-LTTE militia allied with the security forces was responsible for the bomb blast. A breakaway from the LTTE formerly headed by V. Muralitharan or Karuna is notorious in the East for its ruthless methods. Now known as the Pillayan group, after its new leader ousted Karuna, it has been engaged in attacks on opponents, seeking to inflame communal clashes between Muslims and Tamils with the backing

of military.

Whoever carried it out, the bombing has played directly into the hands of the government. Schools were closed in the area of the blast and security stepped up in Colombo. Government ministers, the military and Sinhala extremist organisations such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) used the attack to intensify communal tensions and create a mood of fear and panic.

The bombing has been useful to deflect the rather timid concerns expressed by Japanese special envoy Yasushi Akashi in Colombo over the weekend. Akashi, who met with Rajapakse, said he was worried that the end of the ceasefire would lead to more violence and civilian casualties. He hinted that Japan might review its aid program in light of the government's decision to pull out of the ceasefire. Japan is Sri Lanka's largest aid donor and, along with US, the EU and Norway, co-sponsor of the so-called peace process.

Norway, which was the formal facilitator of the peace process, has expressed similar concerns. The Norwegian-led Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversaw the ceasefire agreement, pulled its staff out of the country yesterday. Norway has been bitterly criticised by the JVP and other Sinhala chauvinist groups for its alleged pro-LTTE bias. SLMM head Johann Solberg appealed for a return to peace talks and a negotiated political solution to the long-running war.

The Bush administration declared that it was "troubled" by the end of the ceasefire, but took no action to push for a resumption of peace talks. In reality, the US, which has stridently criticised the LTTE and supplied military aid to Sri Lanka, has been a major factor in encouraging the Rajapakse government to return to war. Significantly, in the wake of the government's decision to pull out of the ceasefire, the FBI issued a statement on its website declaring the LTTE to be "among the most dangerous and deadly extremists in the world".

The collapse of the ceasefire followed Rajapakse's narrow victory in the 2005 presidential elections with the support of the JVP. His election promises included the renegotiation of the 2002 ceasefire to strengthen the position of the military—a move that effectively destroyed any further peace talks. Shortly after Rajapakse won office, the military and allied

paramilitaries, such as the Karuna group, launched a dirty covert war designed to weaken the LTTE and goad it into reacting.

In July 2006, Rajapakse ordered the military onto the offensive to seize the LTTE-held area of Mavilaru—a flagrant breach of the ceasefire that provoked no international criticism. The pretext was an LTTE protest that shut the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate, cutting off water to farmers downstream. It soon became apparent that the Mavilaru operation was just the first of a series of offensives designed to oust the LTTE from the eastern province.

An estimated 5,000 people have died in fighting over the past two years and 200,000 civilians have been driven from their homes. Many have been the victims of the military's use of indiscriminate aerial and artillery attacks. At the same time, there is considerable circumstantial evidence that the military and its associated paramilitaries have abducted and killed hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, in a further attempt to terrorise the local population. The decision to formally pull out of the ceasefire was simply the final nail in the coffin of the so-called international peace process.

The Rajapakse government is politically responsible for restarting the island's brutal 25-year civil war and thus for yesterday's bus bombing, along with the many other tragedies that the renewed conflict has already produced.



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