Fighting in Sri Lanka continues unabated as ceasefire expires

Sarath Kumara
26 January 2008

The formal end of the 2002 Sri Lankan ceasefire on January 16 has been marked by daily clashes between the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Having unilaterally torn up the truce, the government and army top brass have declared their intention of seizing the remaining LTTE strongholds in the northern Wanni region by the end of the year.

Army Commander, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, told foreign correspondents on January 11 that the military had reduced the LTTE to about 4,500 fighters after killing 2,300 in the East and about 1,500 in the North since mid-2006. He declared that government troops were in no hurry, but added: "I do not want to hand over this issue to the next army commander." Fonseka is due to retire in December.

What Fonseka was describing is a brutal war of attrition. The military's aim is to exploit its superior weaponry and size to cut off the LTTE's supply lines, wear down resistance, weaken the LTTE, create panic among civilians through sustained aerial bombing, and steadily advance into LTTE-held territory. In conjunction with allied Tamil paramilitaries, the army has been also conducting a dirty war of abduction and assassination aimed at undermining the LTTE and terrorising the country's Tamil minority.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has abandoned the pretence of adhering to the 2002 ceasefire, giving two weeks notice of his government's intention to pull out on January 2. In fact, the military has been breaching the agreement since July 2006 when it launched its first offensive to take the LTTE-held area of Mavilaru. The ceasefire formally expired on January 16 and the Norwegian-led Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) has left the country.

Having overrun all major LTTE bases in the East, the military is focussing its attention on the North. The LTTE's headquarters are based in the town of Kilinochchi. Fighting has been focussed in four key areas: Mannar in the northwest; Muhamalai on the Jaffna peninsula to the north of Kilinochchi, Vavuniya to the south of Kilinochchi and the eastern area of Welioya near the key LTTE base at Mullaitivu.

There is no independent reporting of the war. The military has banned journalists from the frontlines and created an atmosphere of intimidation designed to silence any critical coverage. Its own reports, like those of the LTTE, are self-serving, and designed to bolster the government's claim to be winning the "war against terrorism". Speaking to *Dinamina* in early January, Fonseka declared that "unpatriotic media" were "the biggest problem" facing the military.

A *Time* magazine report on January 8 explained: "What reports are available make it clear that Sri Lankan government forces and Tamil Tiger fighters are poised along the line of control in the country's north, gearing up for inevitable battles in the coming weeks. Civilians in the area reported that heavy shelling and artillery exchanges could be heard through last week. Clashes during the first weekend of 2008 killed over 70 combatants, including Shanmuganathan Ravishankar, the [deputy] head of Tiger military intelligence."

The heaviest clashes since the end of the ceasefire have been in the Mannar area, which the army has been seeking to seize from the LTTE since last July. As in other northern areas, the LTTE has fortified its positions and any advances have been slowed by the onset of the northeastern monsoon. Fighting has taken place near the villages of Pallikuli, Adampan, Uyilankulam and Parappankandal.

The military has targetted Mannar in particular as part of its efforts to choke off supplies to the LTTE. The area is adjacent to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu across the narrow Palk Strait. In his "Situation Report" in last weekend's *Sunday Times*, defence correspondent Iqbal Athas said the military's push in the Madhu area is aimed at taking control of the Sea Tiger base at Vidutaltivu. Last year, the army captured the fishing village of Silavathurai, which the military claimed was a key smuggling route for arms from southern India.

"The seizure of the Sea Tiger base at Vidutaltivu, military sources say, will deny guerrillas another major landing area and operational base. They say it would also deny easy access to the Tamil Nadu coast from where military and medical supplies were smuggled in smaller quantities. The guerrillas, the sources reveal, have established safe houses to stockpile supplies and smuggle them in smaller quantities," the *Sunday Times* stated.

Over the past year, the LTTE has already suffered significant logistical setbacks, including the sinking of most of its larger supply ships by the Sri Lankan navy.

Military reports indicate ongoing small-scale clashes—"terrorist bunkers" overrun, small arms caches found, sporadic LTTE reprisals. Over the past week, situation reports cite five "terrorists" killed on January 17 in separate incidents in Jaffna and Welioya; 19 killed on January 18 in Vavuniya and Batticaloa; 2 killed on January 19; 32 killed on January 20 in various clashes mainly in

© World Socialist Web Site

Mannar; 34 killed on January 21 in Mannar and Vavuniya; 31 killed on January 22 in Mannar, Vavuniya and Welioya; and 3 more on January 23.

There are wide disparities between government and LTTE reports of casualties. In his "Situation Report" in the *Sunday Times*, Athas all but declared that the military falsified the figures. "Other details pertaining to this military thrust from Mannar, the longest in offensives against the guerrillas in recent years, cannot be disclosed in view of serious constraints. These include casualty counts and the sacrifices made by troops on the ground. In the case of the latter, such a move would earn the ire of the seniors."

In comments late last month in the state-owned *Dinamina* newspaper, army commander Fonseka explained that the military had set a target of killing 10 LTTE fighters a day. There is no doubt that local commanders have included dead civilians to inflate the daily body count. In this communal war, the military treats all Tamils as potential "terrorists". The defence ministry this week claimed that 592 "terrorists" had been killed this year while government forces had lost only 21 personnel.

Yesterday, military aircraft struck an alleged LTTE transport base at Selvanagar, near Kilinochchi. According to a pro-LTTE source, at least one civilian was killed in the raid. The LTTE has no effective answer to the increased use of the Sri Lankan air force to destroy its military infrastructure and terrorise the civilian population. Its own "air force" consists of several light planes that have been used to carry out largely symbolic raids on Colombo, and a more direct attack on a northern air base last October.

On January 17, according to an LTTE report, air force jets dropped bombs just 100 metres away from the Kanakapuram Maha Viththiyaalayam School, which had 790 students and 22 teachers. About 5,000 students from the area have fled from schools in the area. In that air raid, one civilian was killed, seven wounded and six houses were destroyed. The defence ministry did not deny the report.

The LTTE appears to be attempting to strike targets in the south of the island, including the capital of Colombo, in a bid to ease the military pressure in the northern areas.

The government has blamed the LTTE for the bombing of a bus last week near Buttala in the eastern Moneragala district in which 27 people died and nearly 60 were injured. While the LTTE has in the past indiscriminately attacked ordinary Sinhalese, the military, either directly or indirectly through an allied paramilitary, is also capable of organising such atrocities to whip up communal hatred.

The Rajapakse government, which is confronting widespread opposition to the economic impact of the conflict, immediately exploited the bombing to justify its renewed "war on terrorism". Rajapakse visited the area on Sunday and attended the funeral of several villagers. The government has distributed shotguns to local villagers and thousands of soldiers and police have been mobilised to search the Moneragala district.

In restarting the war, the government has been heavily dependent on international support. The so-called co-sponsors of the "peace process" that followed the 2002 ceasefire—the US, Japan, the EU and Norway—have tacitly supported the renewed war. Japan's special envoy, Yasushi Akashi, visited Colombo last week and expressed "deep concern" about the end of the truce, but did not even hint that Tokyo would use its previous threats of withdrawing aid to force the government to return to peace talks.

Both India and the US have been quietly providing military assistance as well as political support to the Rajapakse government. Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee told journalists on January 12: "[T]he clashes between Sri Lankan forces and LTTE terrorists have increased. So far as terrorism is concerned, our position is that of zero tolerance. So any country that takes action against terrorists is free to do so within their legal system."

India's NDTV reported on January 16 that Indian navy chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta acknowledged that the Indian navy had helped its Sri Lankan counterpart against the LTTE. Sri Lanka's navy commander Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda thanked New Delhi for logistical support in helping to break the LTTE's backbone.

In another significant development, US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Robert Willard visited Sri Lanka on January 17. A US embassy press release noted that the admiral had reviewed ongoing maritime cooperation, including naval training and exchanges between the two countries. He met with Rajapakse and the country's military brass and visited the eastern navy base of Trincomalee to discuss "US-Sri Lankan cooperation against LTTE terrorism".

The exact nature of the Indian "logistical support" and US "cooperation" has not been spelled out. But it is inconceivable that Sri Lanka's limited naval resources could have located and sunk LTTE supply boats last year, thousands of kilometres from the island, without sophisticated assistance and intelligence.

While the military outcome of the conflict remains uncertain, the war is intensifying the political crisis confronting the fragile ruling coalition as huge increases in defence spending compound the inflation being caused by spiralling oil prices and growing international financial instability. In December, the country's inflation rate jumped by a massive 26 percent on an annualised basis. While it routinely denounces strikes and protests as tantamount to treason, the government's actions are setting the stage for a major eruption of social struggles.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site