

Sri Lankan military bogged down in northern offensives against the LTTE

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The euphoria in the Sri Lankan government and military over the prospects of a quick victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is beginning to fade. While the security forces regularly report the killing of LTTE members, little progress appears to have been made in seizing the LTTE's major northern strongholds in the Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu districts.

Open warfare erupted in July 2006 when President Mahinda Rajapakse ordered the army to capture the LTTE-held area of Mavilaru in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement. In the space of a year, the military quickly overran the remaining LTTE bases in the East and turned its attention to the LTTE's northern territory. Last July, the Rajapakse government celebrated the victory in the East with jingoistic speeches and a parade through the capital of Colombo.

In January, Rajapakse finally dropped the pretence of adhering to the ceasefire. The decision to pull out of the truce was accompanied by a series of statements declaring that the LTTE would be defeated militarily by the end of the year. On December 30, Army Commander, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, bragged to the *Sunday Observer* that "the LTTE could not prevent losing their remaining 3,000 cadres and there is no assurance that the LTTE Leader V. Prabhakaran would survive for the next six months".

Fonseka, who is expected to retire in December, told foreign journalists on January 11 that he would not hand the war to the next army chief. Government leaders enthusiastically repeated the statement, even declaring that Prabhakaran would be captured and sent to India for trial over the murder of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a LTTE suicide bomber.

A month later, however, the military high command is not so confident. On February 10, Fonseka explained in *Irida Lakbima* that he was not committed to a deadline for winning the war. "They [the LTTE] are an organised force with a lot of experience... I don't conduct the war looking at deadlines and timeframes." Expressing a degree of frustration, he added: "Can a war that has been going on for

more than 25 years be completed by March? But, what I say is—give us a chance."

On February 23, military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara echoed the army commander's comments. As reported by Agence France Presse, he declared that the military was "winning the war...but we have never said that we will finish them off. We have never set deadlines."

Military operations in the North were always going to be more difficult than in the East, where the LTTE had been seriously weakened by a devastating split in its ranks in 2004. The breakaway group, initially headed by V. Muralitharan or Karuna, took an estimated one third of the LTTE's total fighting force. It has since collaborated closely with the military in conducting operations in the East against the LTTE, and terrorising the Tamil population.

The course of the war is difficult to follow in detail. The only sources of information are the security forces and the LTTE, which both distort reports to suit their own propaganda. The army allows no correspondents into the war zones. The Colombo media functions under the threat of censorship and physical violence. Anyone publishing negative reports on the military is quickly branded a traitor.

The military's basic strategy appears to be one of attrition—the use of superior firepower, including air strikes and artillery bombardments, to sow panic among the population, wear down the LTTE's defences and kill its fighters. The high command is only too well aware of the failure of previous broad scale offensives. In 2000, the LTTE inflicted a devastating series of defeats on the army, capturing its key strategic base at Elephant Pass, in a sharp counteroffensive against an overextended military operation.

In the North, the military is seeking to slowly advance on the LTTE strongholds from all sides—from Mannar in the west, Vavuniya in the south, Welioya in the east and Muhamalai in the north. While there have been numerous reports of small victories and LTTE casualties—all undoubtedly exaggerated—the military has failed to gain a great deal of ground.

The Mannar operations started last July. The army

captured the fishing village of Silavathurai last year and has since seized several other areas but the gains remain small. The main aim in present operations is to secure the Madhu area then Viduthalaithivu. The area is crucial to the LTTE's main supply routes from the neighbouring southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Recent fighting has taken place around the Madhu church area, including Admapan and Pandivirichchan, in preparation for a push on Viduthalaithivu. The *Sunday Times* reported last weekend that the military had announced the capture of the Pandivirichchaan area and the killing of 20 LTTE members. The pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* reported the recapture of the area on the evening of the same day, with the killing of 11 soldiers.

On Sunday, the LTTE claimed to have repelled the military's advance from Palaikushi. This week, the defence ministry claimed the army had penetrated deeper into LTTE-held area in Mannar, killing 83 LTTE cadres and wounding many more. It admitted the military had lost 9 soldiers with 40 injured. Whatever the true figures and territory gained or lost, the fighting is obviously heavy.

On the Welioya front, the results are similarly inconclusive. The military reported that it gained control of some areas previously in "no-man's land" under the ceasefire arrangements. On February 26, the army handed over the bodies of 14 LTTE fighters to the International Red Cross. This week, however, the LTTE claimed to have thwarted the military's advances, killed six soldiers and taken ammunition. The seizure of Welioya would open the way for an advance on Mullaithivu, a major LTTE basing area.

The aerial bombardment of LTTE-held areas continues unabated. Earlier this week, the air force bombed Poonakari close to Muhamalai, claiming its fighter jets were targeting an LTTE sea base. On February 22, warplanes bombed the same area. According to the LTTE, that attack resulted in deaths of nine civilians, including an infant and two children. On Monday, the air force bombed what it claimed was a communication centre in Kilinochchi where the LTTE headquarters are based.

Another sign of the military's difficulties is its turn to India for assistance. General Fonseka began a six-day tour to India on Sunday "to further strengthen the military ties". He will meet India's defence minister, A.K. Anthony, as well as top military and civilian officials in a bid to obtain weapons and light aircraft. However, Fonseka is unlikely to get all that he wants from India, which to date has provided limited assistance and training. While wanting to prevent an LTTE victory, New Delhi is concerned that the ongoing war will inflame opposition in Tamil Nadu.

The Sri Lankan military is under pressure from Rajapakse

to deliver a quick victory. His government, an unstable coalition of 13 parties, confronts growing popular discontent over the economic impact of the war, which is helping to fuel inflation and undermine living standards. Rajapakse needs success stories to boost his chauvinist appeals and to dispel fears in ruling circles of an inconclusive and protracted war that will inevitably fuel an economic and political crisis.

Speaking on Sunday at a rally in Ratnapura organised by his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Rajapakse declared that the government would carry out "liberation operations" against the LTTE until "every inch of land is captured and the last terrorist is completely destroyed". He insisted it was the "bounden duty" of people to support the war.

The government is not conducting a war for "liberation" or against "terrorism" but to maintain the economic and political dominance of the country's Sinhala Buddhist elite. For six decades, Colombo governments have whipped up communal politics to divide working people and prop up their rule. Rajapakse's decision to plunge the country back to war was bound up with his government's inability to deal with growing unrest over declining living standards.

The return to war has only compounded the economic burdens on working people. The military has purchased new weapons and boosted its strength to 150,000, recruiting 34,000 last year. Another 15,000 are to be recruited this year. Along with rising oil prices, military expenditure is a major factor fuelling inflation. The annualised inflation rate hit 24 percent in February. Rajapakse has responded to any opposition, including strikes and protests, by demonising critics as "pro-LTTE".

These social and political tensions will inevitably sharpen if the military operations against the LTTE slow, or if the army suffers reverses. That accounts for the shrill tone of Rajapakse's speech at Ratnapura—it is a sign of growing desperation.



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