

Sri Lankan president nervously assesses military stalemate

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Nearly three months after it formally abandoned the 2002 ceasefire, the Sri Lankan government's hopes for a quick victory against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are fading as military operations in the North become bogged down.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) with military commanders from the northern war fronts at his residence on March 28 to discuss the situation. Four northern area commanders were present, along with two key naval commanders.

Like every other aspect of the war, the NSC meeting was subject to heavy censorship. Any hint that military operations are not proceeding as planned has political ramifications for Rajapakse's shaky ruling coalition, which re-launched the communal war and denounced any, even limited, criticisms as undermining the war effort and tantamount to treason.

In that context, the "Situation Report" in last weekend's *Sunday Times* indicated an atmosphere of crisis at the NSC meeting. Offensive operations in the North began in the Mannar sector last July, after the LTTE was driven out of its eastern strongholds, and in other northern sectors in January. Army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka predicted he would defeat the LTTE militarily by the end of 2008 when he planned to retire.

At the NSC meeting, however, none of the northern military commanders could boast of impressive victories. The army's ability to make rapid advances in the East depended in large measure on a debilitating split in the LTTE ranks in 2004 that resulted in the loss of thousands of fighters and their arms. Moreover, the breakaway Karuna group acted as an auxiliary militia, collaborating with the military in attacking LTTE positions. In the north, the army is fighting on four fronts against entrenched LTTE positions in a war of attrition in which casualties have been heavy on both sides.

According to *Sunday Times* defence correspondent Athas Iqbal, the NSC meeting decided that the weather was to

blame. Most of the military commanders, he wrote, "were of the view that an unexpected enemy—inconstant rains—had hampered offensive operations in the Vanni. These were both in the Mannar and Weli Oya sectors.... The bunkers were flooded. Air activity, like surveillance, close air support, casualty evacuation, among others, were being hampered by bad weather. Roads were muddy. Deployment of armoured vehicles was posing a problem."

The military also accused the media of not being sufficiently patriotic. "A senior army officer had taken issue over Rupavahini, the national television network not airing visuals they sent regularly depicting successes in the battlefield," Iqbal wrote. "Instead footage of previous military activity was being broadcast." An angry president immediately summoned Rupavahini officials to the meeting to explain.

Iqbal cautiously noted that, having launched the war, the president, who is also commander-in-chief and defence minister, "would naturally want to ascertain the progress made in the light of heavy expenditure incurred on defence. Some aspects relating to this cannot be commented upon due to personal constraints. They include the all-important subject of casualties." Iqbal, a conservative commentator with connections to the military hierarchy, came under intense fire from the government last year for exposing a scandal involving defence procurements.

Other commentators also point to the military standoff in the North. Writing about the same NSC meeting, the state-owned *Sunday Observer* declared that Rajapakse was "concerned over when the troops were able to get the Madhu area ... The President was also worried about the increase of casualties among the troops."

Operations in the Mannar areas have been proceeding for more than eight months without significant progress. Fighting is currently taking place near the Madhu Church, leading to accusations and counter-accusations by the military and LTTE that the other is desecrating the area. Priests have moved out of the church, along with a statue regarded by Catholics as sacred.

The *Island* reported on Monday that the army was confronting stiff resistance from the LTTE in the Weli Oya sector. The newspaper quoted military spokesman Brigadier Nanayakkara as saying that although the army had “inflicted sizeable damages on the defenders, the LTTE is determinedly resisting troops operating on the Weli Oya front.”

The navy suffered a setback on March 22 when the LTTE sunk a Dvora Fast Attack Craft, resulting in the deaths of at least 10 sailors. Speculation continues as to the means used by the LTTE—whether it was a suicide attack or a mine. The sinking took place in deep waters off the LTTE base at Mullaithivu. The attack raises concerns in Colombo that the LTTE may be able to disrupt supplies to military forces based on the northern Jaffna peninsula. The LTTE currently controls all land routes to Jaffna.

A recent request for more supplies from Pakistan on an emergency basis is another sign of the strains on the military. According to the *India Asia News Service* (IANS), Army Commander Fonseka asked for 150,000 60mm mortar rounds as well as hand grenades for immediate delivery. Other requests included 81 mm, 121 mm and 130 mm mortar ammunition worth \$US25 million. Last year, the military bought \$50 million worth of ammunition from Pakistan.

Ordering large quantities of replacement ammunition indicates preparation for new offensives. The Sri Lankan army has relied heavily on indiscriminate artillery and mortar barrages, as well as aerial bombardment, not only to attack LTTE positions, but to terrorise the local population. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled their homes over the past two years.

Early last month, General Fonseka met with the Indian defence officials and requested additional military equipment. India has been providing military training, shared intelligence and non-offensive equipment to the Sri Lankan forces. Concerned about the reaction among Tamils in southern India, New Delhi has been reluctant to openly support the war and appears to have denied Fonseka’s latest appeal.

Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake made a four-day visit last month to Israel, another of Sri Lanka’s arms suppliers. The delegation included Ranjit Wickremasinghe, chief executive officer of the Lanka Logistic Company and other top military officials. The Lanka Logistic Company, which is controlled by the defence ministry, is the sole purchaser of defence items for the military.

Wickramanayake met with Israeli Defence Minister Euhard Barak and visited the state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries and other military suppliers. Sri Lanka has bought naval vessels, war planes and guns from Israel since the

1980s but this is the first time that a Sri Lankan prime minister has visited the country. Military hardware and assistance was undoubtedly at the top of the agenda.

Jane’s Defence Weekly reported on March 14 that the Sri Lankan government had concluded arrangements with Russia to buy five MiG-29 fighter-bomber aircraft.

These large military purchases will place further strains on government finances. Rajapakse has allocated 167 billion Sri Lankan rupees (\$US16 billion) for defence in the 2008 budget—a 20 percent increase over 2007. To cover the growing budget deficit, the government has had to borrow domestically as well as on the international money market at high interest rates.

The military spending and international price hikes for oil and food pushed the country’s annualised inflation rate to 28 percent in March. Far from seeking a political solution to the war, Rajapakse is driven to intensify military operations in a bid to deflect mounting popular anger over deteriorating living standards. Any military setbacks and high casualties would only further fuel opposition, including in the government’s own ranks.

Rajapakse’s policies are a product of the communal politics practiced by Sri Lankan ruling elite since independence in 1948. Unable to solve any of the country’s social problems and provide basic democratic rights, successive Colombo governments resorted to whipping up to anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class.

The government of President J. R. Jayawardene provoked the war in 1983 as a means of diverting attention from the devastating impact of his free market politics. Despite more than 70,000 deaths, none of his successors has been able to end the conflict, precisely because they have been mired in the same reactionary outlook.



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