

Sri Lankan army advances into key LTTE areas

Sarath Kumara
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After a military stalemate lasting nearly a year, the Sri Lankan army has recently captured several key positions in the northern areas of the island from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The overall objective of these operations appears to be to tighten the noose around the town of Kilinochchi, which has functioned for more than a decade as the LTTE's administrative and military centre.

The military went onto the offensive in the North last July after securing control of all LTTE strongholds in the Eastern Province. Unlike in the East, however, where the LTTE had suffered a debilitating split, the army ran into concerted resistance in the northern areas, where the LTTE had prepared elaborate defences. Two offensives near Muhamalai in November and April ended in disaster, with hundreds of casualties and the loss of significant military hardware.

For months the frontlines have been relatively static. Rather than major offensives, the military has waged a relentless war of attrition using its superior firepower and air strikes, not only to inflict casualties on the LTTE but also to terrorise the local population. Even allowing for official bias, the steady stream of reports of LTTE dead, injured and captured indicates that such methods have taken their toll.

The first breakthrough came in April when the army seized the area around the Catholic Church at Madhu in the northwest of the island. In mid-July, security forces took the strategically important coastal village of Vidattativu. Vidattativu was vital to the LTTE's supply lines as it is located just across the narrow Palk Strait from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The LTTE only withdrew its forces after weeks of heavy fighting.

On August 12, the defence ministry claimed that its troops had reached Mulankavil, 35 kilometres to the north of Mannar. On August 13, the army captured the small, heavily fortified town of Kalvilan, just 15 kilometres south of Kilinochchi. On August 22, the military reported the overrunning of nearby Thunukkai, another small but strategic town considered vital if the LTTE is to defend its stronghold at Mallavi.

On August 16, the defence ministry announced that the army had seized an LTTE jungle base at Andankulam in the northern eastern Weli Oya area. A military spokesman claimed that the base was equipped with around 100 underground bunkers and

four lecture halls, along with water wells and other facilities.

There is no way to confirm these reports as independent journalists are not allowed in the war zones. Both the government and the LTTE routinely exaggerate casualty figures and downplay their failures. The military and its paramilitary allies have created a climate of fear and intimidation through the abduction, torture and murder of journalists who have been in any way critical of the military.

President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government have certainly seized on the latest advances. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, told the London-based *Times* on August 12: "It [the capture of Kilinochchi] is possible by the end of this year". Campaigning for provincial elections last weekend, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramayake even boasted that the army would take Kilinochchi by polling day. "We are very close. Kilinochchi is not very far from our sight," he said.

In the event, the army did not reach Kilinochchi district last weekend. But the LTTE's silence on the government's claims does lend credence to the reports. Rather than denying the advances, the LTTE has focussed on the humanitarian disaster created by the military. "Persistent shelling in this area, where two weeks ago a large number of internally displaced people sought refuge, forced them to [move] again further inside Kilinochchi," an LTTE statement declared last week. "Many of the internally displaced people, who are yet to receive temporary shelter and are thus still living under trees, are struggling to seek shelter from the rain."

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Colombo has confirmed that the recent fighting has triggered a new wave of refugees. Its latest estimates add between 55,000 to 75,000 people to the 125,000 who have already been displaced from the LTTE-controlled Vanni region. The UNHCR warned that emergency supplies for the victims of the war were running dangerously low.

As was the case in the East, the government has imposed an economic blockade on LTTE-controlled areas. Those who are fleeing from the shelling, bombardment and lack of basic supplies are being strictly controlled. The military has opened just three exit points from civilians to cross into the government-controlled Vavuniya.

The ferocity of the military offensives is underscored by the military's own casualty figures. The statistics presented last month to parliament showed that 751 soldiers have been killed and 4,913 injured in the seven months up to July. The figures are almost certainly an underestimate of the military's actual losses.

The gains made by the army in the East and now the North are the result of a number of factors, not least of which is government's ruthless determination to pursue the military destruction of the LTTE at any cost. Since narrowly winning office in November 2005, President Rajapakse has poured huge additional sums of money into the defence budget to purchase new equipment and finance the war.

The military's systematic bombardment of LTTE-held areas has been paralleled by a vicious terror campaign in government-held zones against the Tamil minority and any critics of the war. Hundreds of people have "disappeared" or been murdered by death squads operated by the military and the paramilitaries. The government has not hesitated to brand any opposition—including protests and strikes by workers, farmers and students—as aiding the "Tiger terrorists" and betraying the motherland.

A major factor in Rajapakse's favour has been the tacit support of the US and other powers for the renewed war. Apart from token criticism of the military's appalling human rights record, the countries that sponsored the so-called international peace process—the US, the EU, Japan and Norway—all lined up behind the Colombo government. Rajapakse's formal abrogation of the 2002 ceasefire in January was greeted with stony silence from the "international community".

The US and India in particular have played a significant role in isolating the LTTE politically and boosting the capabilities of the Sri Lankan military. India supplied crucial intelligence earlier in the year that enabled the Sri Lankan navy to intercept and sink several of the LTTE's supply vessels on the high seas. The Indian military has been increasingly involved in training its Sri Lankan counterparts and supplying so-called non-lethal military hardware. At the same time, the Indian security forces have cracked down on LTTE operatives in Tamil Nadu, further intensifying the LTTE's supply problems.

Under pressure from Washington, the EU and Canada outlawed the LTTE in 2006 and 2007 respectively, undermining its ability to raise financial and political support from the large Tamil diaspora. The US, UK and other European countries have since taken steps to round up LTTE supporters and block fund-raising activities. As a result, the LTTE has floundered politically—its perspective of a separate Tamil statelet always relied on the backing of one or other of the major powers.

Addressing a provincial council election rally last week, President Rajapakse hysterically declared: "There is no turning back under any circumstances or influence now, until every inch of land is recaptured and each and every terrorist is killed

or captured." After winning at the August 23 provincial poll, he boasted: "The strength and morale that our heroic troops will receive from this victory in their battles to finally end bloody terrorism from our country is immeasurable."

The outcome of the protracted and bloody 25-year old civil war is yet to be determined. But a military success in crushing the LTTE would resolve none of the political issues that led to the war in the first place and would quickly produce a new political crisis. Ever since formal independence in 1948, successive governments have relied on anti-Tamil chauvinism to bolster their support among the Sinhala majority and divide the working class along communal lines.

For more than two decades, the Colombo political establishment has exploited the war to divert attention from their inability to meet the aspirations of working people for basic democratic rights and decent living standards. The United National Party launched the war in 1983 as mass opposition to its market reforms was emerging from workers and farmers. Rajapakse's Sri Lankan Freedom Party relaunched the conflict in 2006 as hostility was rising to his broken election promises to improve living standards.

If the Sri Lankan government were able to finally crush the LTTE militarily, the "victory" would do nothing to resolve the underlying communal tensions or the country's social and economic crisis. Having demanded that working people "sacrifice" for the war, Rajapakse would immediately confront demands for better pay and conditions, improved services and financial assistance for struggling farmers, none of which his government is capable of meeting. His response will inevitably be a military one: to use police-state measures against the working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike.



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