

Fighting intensifies as Sri Lankan army advances on LTTE stronghold

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Heavy fighting is taking place in northern Sri Lanka as government forces advance toward the town of Kilinochchi, which has functioned as the political and military headquarters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil (LTTE) for the past decade. Its fall to the army would be not only a significant military setback to the LTTE but also a blow to its political ambitions for a separate Tamil statelet.

The Sri Lankan military has focussed its offensives on the northern Vanni region since July 2007, when it drove the LTTE from its remaining strongholds in the island's East. Over the past three months, the LTTE has lost control of significant areas of western Vanni, including parts of Mannar, Viduttaltivu and Mallavi. If Kilinochchi is captured, the army could cut communication and supply lines between the remaining LTTE-held areas in western Vanni from its strongholds on the Jaffna Peninsula and eastern Vanni, particularly its major base of Mullaithivu on the eastern coast.

The LTTE has been fighting a largely rearguard action from well-prepared defensive positions, but has not been able to stop the advances of the military, which has used its superior numbers and firepower in a grinding war of attrition. Army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka boasted last Monday that "[our] forces are around four kilometres from Kilinochchi town. In fact we can see some of the buildings... We will fire the first shots towards Kilinochchi town next week."

According to yesterday's *Sunday Times*, the air force intensified its bombing of targets in the Vanni last Friday, including in and around Kilinochchi. The immediate target of the military's advance is the small town of Kokavil on the A-9 highway, Sri Lanka's main north-south road. Its capture would cut Kilinochchi off from other LTTE-held areas on the highway south of Kokavil.

Already most civilians have fled Kilinochchi, the largest town in the Vanni. The *Sunday Times* wrote: "By yesterday, reports said, 85 percent of the civilians in the area have evacuated the town and its environs. Some offices run by the guerrillas have shifted. Some of the camps have also been shifted though the guerrillas remain in the area. Schools that catered to 30,000 children are closed. Only the Kachcheri (District Secretary's Office) functioned with limited staff."

Fighting is taking place on three fronts. After taking the key town of Mallavi, the army has concentrated on Akkarayankulam, which would bring its troops closer to Kilinochchi. The army is also moving in on Nachchikuda, on the western coast, as part of a

broader offensive to seize Pooneryn and open the A-32 highway to the Jaffna Peninsula. By capturing LTTE bases on the western coast, the military is seeking to cut LTTE supplies from southern India. On a third front around Welioya in the East, government forces have captured several areas.

Both the military and the LTTE have reported fierce fighting. The defence ministry web site stated last Friday: "Fighting between troops and the LTTE is constantly reported from the area, especially at Akkarayankulam and Nachchikuda, as Tigers are putting-up stiff resistance to prolong the military surge, defence observers state. Strategically this is a more important phase of the military advances in Vanni: it's Pooneryn the next stop along the A-32 where LTTE is believed to have mounted most of its artillery batteries".

The death toll continues to mount, with widely varying figures given by both sides. On September 15, the LTTE reported it had killed 22 soldiers and injured 53 in clashes around Akkarayankulam, while the military acknowledged only three dead and nine injured. On September 19, the defence ministry claimed the army had killed 17 LTTE cadres while suffering five dead in the same area. There are no means for verifying these figures as journalists are barred from the frontlines and even reporters with contacts in the military have been threatened for criticising or contradicting defence ministry accounts.

In an attempt to boost morale, the LTTE staged a September 9 attack on the Vavuniya military command complex. A number of suicides bombers, backed by artillery and two light aircraft, appear to have targeted the military's main radar tower used to monitor the LTTE's planes and direct air force bombing raids. At least 25 people were killed in the attack, including 12 soldiers, a policeman and 11 LTTE fighters. The air force claimed to have shot down an LTTE aircraft.

Two of those injured in the attack were Indian technicians, highlighting the extent of India's support for the government's communal war. The Indian government continues to call for a political solution to the conflict as a means of placating anger among the Tamil population in southern India. At the same time, however, New Delhi is concerned that any gains by the LTTE would encourage separatist movements inside India. As a result, India has quietly boosted the Sri Lankan army.

A weakened LTTE

The military position of the LTTE appears increasingly desperate. It has called on all able-bodied civilians in areas under

its control to undergo military training. In an interview in August, LTTE political wing leader B. Nadesan claimed that his organisation had in the past built a “People’s Force” and overrun government positions through “unceasing waves”. He played down the significance of the current offensives and hinted that the LTTE was laying a trap for the military.

“When the civilians fled the Jaffna peninsula [in the mid-1990s], everyone thought that the LTTE was weakened. But we showed to the world that the people were with us when we regained Mullaithivu... [T]his is not the first occasion the Tigers have faced the government military with their backs to the wall,” Nadesan said. This appeal to past glories, however, only highlights the LTTE’s weak political and military situation.

The LTTE’s perspective of a separate Tamil mini-state was always dependent on the support of India and one or other of the major powers. After its military advances, particularly in 2000, the LTTE signed a ceasefire in 2002 and entered into talks with the United National Party (UNP)-led government for a power-sharing arrangement that would provide political autonomy to the North and East. The US, European Union, Japan and Norway formally sponsored the negotiations, with India also backing the talks, but none of these powers supported any devolution of significant power to the LTTE. The US in particular insisted that the LTTE had to renounce “terrorism” and disarm before any progress could be made.

None of the major powers opposed President Mahinda Rajapakse’s decision to plunge the country back to war in mid-2006, nor his tearing up of the ceasefire agreement earlier this year. By the time the war restarted, the capacity of the Sri Lankan military had been bolstered through new arms purchases. Whereas in 2000 the LTTE had been able to pound army positions with multi-barrel rocket launchers and artillery, the military now had the decisive edge. It has not hesitated to use new war planes and long-range artillery indiscriminately against LTTE-held areas.

At the same time, the LTTE has been isolated internationally. Under pressure from the Bush administration, Canada and the EU both banned the LTTE as a “terrorist organisation,” undermining its ability to gain political and financial support from the large Tamil diaspora.

The co-chairs of the peace process—the US, EU, Japan and Norway—met at the UN last Wednesday and issued an utterly hypocritical statement expressing concern about the civilian population caught in the fighting. US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher told the press that the meeting had placed “a lot of emphasis right now on the protection of human rights for civilians” and urged the government to respect and extend “human rights protections to the people in the areas they take over”.

Two weeks ago, however, the Sri Lankan government ordered all UN aid officials out of Kilinochchi. Its strategy is to tighten its stranglehold around the LTTE-held Vanni by restricting supplies of basic essentials and terrorising the local population with air strikes and artillery barrages. The air force has dropped leaflets calling on civilians to flee to government-held areas. Only a handful of people have done so, partly due to LTTE restrictions and also out of fear and hostility toward the government and military.

Far from “liberating” the population from the LTTE and ensuring “human rights,” the Sri Lankan government has used the war to extend police-state measures not only in areas seized from the LTTE, but throughout the island. The Tamil minority in particular has been the target of systematic harassment, intimidation and arbitrary arrests without trial. Over the past two years, hundreds of people have been abducted and murdered by death squads either directed by or operating with the assistance of the military.

An estimated 300,000 people have been forced to flee fighting in the north. Having been compelled to withdraw from Kilinochchi, UN aid agencies have expressed concern about the plight of these refugees, who lack sufficient food, shelter and medicine. As a minor concession following the meeting at the UN, the Sri Lankan government has announced it will allow UN officials to accompany convoys providing food to refugees in the Wanni.

The Rajapakse government is anxious for a victory over the LTTE to divert widespread hostility among working people over the impact of the war. The 25-year conflict has already resulted in the deaths of more than 70,000 people. Huge expenditures on the war over the past two years have been a major factor driving inflation to 30 percent and undermining living standards.

Far from resolving Sri Lanka’s present political and economic crisis, the military defeat of the LTTE will only change the character of a communal conflict that is rooted in the very nature of bourgeois rule on the island. Since formal independence, successive governments have time and again exploited Sinhala communalism as the means for dividing and weakening the working class. The eruption of war in 1983 was preceded by a savage anti-Tamil pogrom throughout the island that resulted in hundreds of deaths and the destruction of Tamil homes and businesses. Some 25 years later, the Rajapakse government has no solution to the island’s economic and social problems and is ruthlessly playing the communal card to justify the war and its police-state measures and to demand ongoing sacrifices from ordinary working people.



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