

War in Sri Lanka heightens tensions with India

Wije Dias

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The ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka is disrupting relations between Colombo and New Delhi despite attempts by both sides to ease tensions. The advances made by the Sri Lankan military against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have not only provoked protests in southern India over the fate of 200,000 war refugees, but are raising concerns in the Indian establishment about the implications of an LTTE defeat.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse sent his brother Basil Rajapakse to New Delhi on October 26 to meet with Indian leaders. The immediate impetus for the trip was a threat by political parties in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu to pull out of the national parliament unless the Indian government forced Sri Lanka to halt the war. Such a move would have undermined the Congress-led government, as several Tamil Nadu parties are part of the ruling coalition. The threat prompted senior Indian officials to summon the Sri Lankan High Commissioner to express their "deep concern" over the war refugees.

Basil Rajapakse met with Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukerjee and the two issued a joint statement. "Both sides agreed that terrorism should be countered with resolve", it stated, while declaring "both sides also discussed the need to move towards a peacefully negotiated political settlement in the island including the north." Rajapakse assured Mukerjee that "the safety and well-being of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka was being taken care of" and India announced that it would send 800 tonnes of relief supplies to northern Sri Lanka.

Stripped of its diplomatic language, the statement gave the green light for the Sri Lankan government to continue its military offensives against the "terrorist" LTTE while paying lip service to concerns in India for the plight of war refugees. Despite reference to a "political settlement", there was no suggestion of a return to the 2002 ceasefire and internationally sponsored negotiations with the LTTE. In mid-2006, President Rajapakse launched a series of military offensives in open breach of the ceasefire, then finally tore it up in January this year.

Following the meeting, Mukerjee rushed to Tamil Nadu to convince Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi to withdraw the resignation threat. Karunanidhi immediately complied, making

clear that the posturing of his Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) party had been aimed at defusing anti-war protests in Tamil Nadu, rather than being motivated by genuine concern for Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Karunanidhi's decision provoked an angry response from DMK ally, the Pattali Makkal Kachchi (PMK). PMK founder S.Ramadoss criticised the chief minister for failing to persuade New Delhi to stop the Sri Lankan war. Karunanidhi immediately justified his move by declaring that "India had constraints in intervening in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka" and warning of the consequences of bringing down the Congress-led government.

While the immediate political crisis appears to have been resolved, the Sri Lankan war is upsetting the careful balancing act previously pursued by New Delhi. Indian governments have opposed the LTTE's demand for a separate state of Eelam in the north and east of Sri Lanka, fearing that it would only encourage separatist movements in India. At the same time, New Delhi has had to posture as a defender of the democratic rights of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka to pacify popular sentiment in Tamil Nadu.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh summed up India's stance when addressing a tri-services conference of military commanders on November 4. "While India had always cared for the welfare of Sri Lankan Tamils," he declared, "it needed to remain committed to Sri Lanka's unity and territorial integrity".

However, the war continues to pose dilemmas for New Delhi. To head off discontent in Tamil Nadu, India has limited its military assistance to Sri Lanka to "non-lethal equipment". As a result, Sri Lanka has turned elsewhere, including to India's regional rivals—Pakistan and China—for arms, provoking concerns in New Delhi, which regards the island as part of its sphere of influence.

External Affairs Minister Mukerjee told the Indian parliament in late October: "In our anxiety [over war refugees], we should not forget the strategic importance of that island and it is not only their security, it is closely connected with our security," he said. "Surely we would not like to have the playground of international players at our backyard."

Commenting on the talks with Basil Rajapakse, Mukerjee

hinted that India may well beef up its support for the Sri Lankan military. "[W]e told them that we can meet their security requirements provided you do not look around [to Pakistan and China]," he said. India is already quietly supplying the Sri Lankan military with intelligence and new radar systems aimed at detecting the light aircraft that the LTTE has been using for small-scale bombing raids.

Since July 2006, the Sri Lankan military has driven the LTTE out of its strongholds in the east of the island and made significant inroads into LTTE-held territory in the northern Wanni region. After months of fierce fighting, the army is poised to move against Kilinochchi, the LTTE's administrative and military centre. The capture of the town would not only be a political blow to the LTTE but threatens to divide its military forces.

While the outcome of the fighting is by no means certain, the LTTE is certainly confronting a larger, better-armed Sri Lankan military than in 2000 when it inflicted a series of major defeats on the army. Since then the Sri Lankan government has, with the backing of the US in particular, isolated the LTTE internationally, limiting its ability to raise funds and buy arms.

Far from resolving the conflict, however, the marginalisation, or even military defeat of the LTTE, would only intensify communal tensions inside Sri Lanka and compound the political problems confronting New Delhi. The 25-year civil war has never been to "fight terrorism" or "promote democracy" but is aimed at entrenching the dominant economic and political position of the island's Sinhala elites over the Tamil minority. The systematic discrimination against Tamils that provoked the war is summed up in the constitutional clause that establishes Buddhism as the state religion of the country.

In the "liberated" eastern province, the Rajapakse government has imposed what amounts to a military occupation presided over by a provincial administration headed by the leader of the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (TMVP)—an armed militia notorious for kidnapping, extortion and murder. The extension of such a regime to the North of the island will not only produce a wave of Tamil refugees entering India but trigger renewed anger in Tamil Nadu over the trampling of the democratic rights of Sri Lankan Tamils.

The fear in New Delhi is that a victory over the LTTE by the Sri Lankan military will have destabilising consequences in India. As a result the Indian government is putting renewed emphasis on its calls for a "political solution" to the conflict as a means of pressuring the Sri Lankan government to make concessions to the Tamil minority.

Significantly, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Robert Blake, provided some backing for India during a recent address at Madras University in Tamil Nadu. He stressed that a complete military victory for the Sri Lankan army would be "very, very difficult" given the LTTE's ability to continue a protracted guerrilla war. He indicated that the US and major powers were continuing to urge the Sri Lankan government "to adopt a

political solution to the conflict within the framework of a united Sri Lanka".

While heavily dependent on Washington's political support, President Rajapakse has staked his political future on a military victory over the LTTE. As the war has compounded the island's economic crisis, the government has whipped up Sinhala chauvinism, denounced critics as traitors and resorted to increasingly anti-democratic methods to silence any opposition. Any government concessions to the Tamil minority would alienate Sinhala extremist allies on which Rajapakse relies.

Basil Rajapakse's trip to New Delhi was criticised for allowing Indian interference in Sri Lanka. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) secretary Tilwin Silva told a press conference that the "situation in Tamil Nadu has been created by the central government of India to pave the way for it to intervene in Sri Lanka's national issue while the Sri Lankan government has also succumbed to Indian pressure." While it is formally in opposition, the JVP has repeatedly supported the Rajapakse government's renewed war, emergency powers and huge military budgets.

The National Freedom Front, which broke from the JVP to forge closer relations with the government, was similarly strident. NFF leader Wimal Weerawansa demanded an emergency meeting of party leaders, declaring: "If India interferes at this hour it will merely be an attempt to salvage the LTTE... The whole nation should pay attention to this issue."

This anti-Indian demagoguery bears little relation to reality. New Delhi continues to politically support the war against the LTTE and to provide military assistance. But the Sri Lankan army's advances and the resultant humanitarian disaster are raising political tensions that the Indian government cannot simply ignore.



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