

Sri Lankan military drives closer to LTTE stronghold

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The Sri Lankan military on Wednesday announced the capture of Akkarayankulam in the northern province of Vanni after days of "heightened fighting" with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Akkarayankulam is the LTTE's main defensive position just nine kilometres south of Kilinochchi, the separatist group's administrative and military centre.

There are no independent reports of the fighting as journalists are barred from the frontlines. However, in an interview with the Indian magazine *Nakkeeran*, LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran acknowledged that government troops were in "close proximity to Kilinochchi town" but added that "capturing Kilinochchi is just a day dream of [President Mahinda] Rajapakse."

For the past two months, the army and the LTTE have been locked in fierce fighting for key positions to the south of Kilinochchi. There is no accurate indication of casualties as both sides provide highly biased accounts. The military is continuing its operations despite the onset of the northeast monsoon. The *Sunday Times* reported on October 26 that the vast majority of soldiers lack shelter, are drenched and fighting under appalling conditions.

The military's determination to press on towards Kilinochchi underscores not only its strategic significance but the Colombo government's desperation for a propaganda victory. President Rajapakse, who restarted the communal war in mid-2006, has exploited the ongoing conflict to distract from the country's deepening economic crisis and to suppress opposition to deteriorating living standards.

Despite the government's claim that it would achieve a quick victory over the LTTE, the renewed war has entered its third year. Huge increases in military spending have been a major factor contributing to inflation, which is running at 30 percent. The defence budget announced this week was increased by another 7 percent to 177 billion

Sri Lankan rupees or about \$US1.7 billion.

In 2006, the army achieved a relatively quick victory in the eastern province, where the LTTE had suffered a debilitating split in its ranks in 2004. In the northern areas, fighting has been more bitter and protracted. Since July 2007, the LTTE has lost several key areas along the western coast including Mannar, Viduttaltivu and Nachchikuda.

Prior to the capture of Akkarayankulam, the army seized Nachchikuda, a major LTTE naval base on the western coast on October 29. The LTTE withdrew to positions further north after two months of intense clashes. Nachchikuda is only 10 kilometres from Pooneryn, the LTTE's last major base on the western coast and a key link in the LTTE's supply lines from southern India.

The capture of Nachchikuda is part of a broader offensive to open a land route to the northern Jaffna Peninsula through Pooneryn. The military has not been able to supply its forces in Jaffna by land since the 1990s.

The army is also engaged in fighting on another front from Weli Oya in the east. Advances have been slow, but the military recently claimed to have taken the small village of Gajabapura. The ultimate aim of the eastern prong of the army's offensives is to take the major LTTE base of Mullaithivu.

At a military ceremony on Monday, Army Commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka boasted that the war was "80 percent over". He claimed that the army had taken back 80 percent of LTTE-held territory since mid-2006 and had killed 12,000 LTTE fighters. "[People] will be able to see the end of this war," he declared.

The LTTE is undoubtedly engaged in desperate defensive actions against far larger Sri Lankan defence forces. Since 2000 when the LTTE overran the strategic Elephant Pass base and inflicted serious losses on government forces, the military has been bolstered and

reequipped. Over the past three years, the Sri Lankan navy has sunk a number of LTTE supply vessels seriously disrupting its supply lines.

The LTTE's retaliation has been limited to occasional forays against military bases and air attacks using two light aircraft. On the night of October 28, LTTE aircraft dropped small bombs on the army area headquarters in Mannar and on the Kelanitissa Thermal Power Station in the capital Colombo. Neither attack inflicted serious damage.

But while the army holds the military advantage, the government and military top brass are deeply concerned about political opposition in the south to the war. Most of the army's recruits are economic conscripts from impoverished Sinhala villages.

As the fighting has intensified, the defence ministry announced on October 24 that it would not continue to provide casualty figures, citing the "need for operational security". The decision is clearly aimed at containing anger and hostility over the rising cost of the war.

Even the military's previous figures make clear that hundreds of soldiers have been killed in recent fighting, producing hostility and anger among southern villagers. During last month's parliamentary debate on the extension of emergency powers, the government announced that 171 soldiers were killed and 1,122 injured in October.

The LTTE, however, is organically incapable of making any appeal to the Sinhala working people. Just as the government bases itself on Sinhala supremacism, the LTTE whips up Tamil communalism, blaming the "Sinhala people" as a whole for the crimes of successive regimes in Colombo. Its indiscriminate bombings only provide grist for the government's propaganda machine and drive a wedge between Tamil and Sinhala workers.

Having torn up the 2002 ceasefire agreement earlier this year, President Rajapakse has made clear that he has no intention of calling a halt to the military offensives. In an interview with the *India Today* magazine on October 31, he reiterated that the war would continue until the LTTE was destroyed militarily.

Rajapakse claimed that progress was "slow because we want zero civilian casualties." Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. The Sri Lankan military has repeatedly used artillery barrages and aerial bombing to terrorise civilians living in LTTE-held areas.

Since mid-2006, an estimated 10,000 people have been killed—mostly civilians—on top of the 60,000 that have died since the war began in 1983. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled their homes and live in terrible

conditions in refugee camps in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

In his interview, Rajapakse declared that there was "no military solution" to the so-called ethnic problem. After capturing the North, he said, the government would implement a "political solution as we did in the East."

The "political solution" in the East is a military occupation buttressed by the LTTE-breakaway group--Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (TMVP). The provincial chief minister is the TMVP deputy leader S. Chandrakanthan, who uses armed TMVP militiamen to terrorise his political opponents and the local population.

Even if the military did succeed in driving the LTTE from its remaining northern strongholds, the communal tensions that led to the war would erupt in another form. For more than half a century, successive governments in Colombo have whipped up anti-Tamil communalism as a means of creating a social base for their rule and dividing the working class.

Far from a military victory over the LTTE leading to peace and stability, the government would be driven to increasingly autocratic methods to shore up its rule. Ominously, defence spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara recently announced that the government planned to recruit another 14,000 soldiers by the end of the year to further boost the present defence force strength of around 125,000 personnel.



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