

Sri Lankan troops capture LTTE stronghold of Pooneryn

Sarath Kumara
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Sri Lankan government troops last Saturday captured the strategic northern town of Pooneryn, the last remaining stronghold of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the island's north-west coast. The LTTE apparently withdrew after several days of fierce fighting. The fall of Pooneryn is a significant blow to the LTTE, which has held the town and surrounding areas since 1997.

The army now controls the entire western coast of the country, effectively cutting off the LTTE's most direct supply lines across the narrow Palk Strait to southern India. LTTE shipments will be compelled to take longer sea routes to the remaining LTTE strongholds on the north-east coastline, making them more vulnerable to interception by the Sri Lankan navy.

Pooneryn is also strategically significant from other standpoints. It is situated near the southern shoreline of the Kilaly lagoon. To the north of the lagoon lies the government-controlled areas on the Jaffna peninsula including Jaffna-town, which the military has had to supply by air or sea. The potential now exists to reopen the previous direct route via the A32 highway and ferry across the Kilaly lagoon to Jaffna.



The capture of Pooneryn has also forced the LTTE to

withdraw its long-range artillery that was used to shell the military headquarters at Palaly on the Jaffna peninsula.

Since President Mahinda Rajapakse relaunched the war in July 2006, the army has seized all of the LTTE strongholds in the eastern province. Over the past year, military offensives have made deep inroads into the LTTE territory in the northern Wanni region.

With the capture of Pooneryn, government forces now control most of the western half of the Wanni and are threatening Kilinochchi, the LTTE's main military and administrative centre. The LTTE is confined to an area no more than 100 kilometres by 60 kilometres. Outside of Kilinochchi, its major bases are at Mullaitivu, on the east coast, and Elephant Pass, a narrow gateway to the northern Jaffna Peninsula.

Despite government boasting that it is about to take Kilinochchi, the offensive appears to have stalled as the LTTE has drawn in fighters from other areas in an effort to defend the town. No independent journalists are permitted at the frontlines. However, the fighting appears to have been fierce with both sides claiming to have inflicted heavy casualties.

To the north of Kilinochchi, the army has launched another offensive. The LTTE claimed to have killed 20 soldiers and injured 80 in fighting on November 16 at Muhamalai, north of Elephant Pass. On November 18, the army reported killing 36 LTTE fighters and wounding another 90 in the same area. There is no means of independently verifying these claims.

On Monday, the army captured the key town of Mankulam, about 30 kilometres south of Kilinochchi, and a stretch of the A9 highway that runs from Colombo to

Jaffna. Mankulam is situated at a key road junction where the A34 highway from Mullaitivu joins the A9. The thrust threatens to link up with another army division pushing up the east coast towards Mullaitivu.

The military has not hesitated to use its superior firepower not only to attack LTTE positions but also to terrorise the civilian population in LTTE-held territory. Fighting has displaced around 300,000 civilians, who are living in makeshift camps with limited access to food, shelter, water and sanitation. The government ordered all UN and non-government aid organisations out of the area in September.

Amnesty International issued a statement yesterday describing the appalling conditions facing refugees with the onset of the north-east monsoon which will last until February. “[The rains] have wreaked havoc on the displaced population. There is an increased risk of disease outbreak with limited access to medicines. The healthcare system in the Wanni desperately needs staff and supplies as hospitals have closed or been forced to move with the relocation of displaced populations. If malaria cases develop, patients will find it hard to access relevant treatment.”

Troops and LTTE cadres are also fighting in difficult conditions. Describing the situation facing soldiers, the Sunday Times wrote last weekend: “There is no drinking water. Large quantities of bottled water have to be transported from Colombo. For some in the frontlines a hot meal is a luxury... A bath is only when sources of water are available. That could even be a week or two. There is no contact with their loved ones for weeks.”

The article added: “When they are injured in the battlefield, they have to endure a rough tractor ride to the rear for evacuation. That could take as much as three to four hours. It is only thereafter that they are either airlifted or transported by road to hospitals.”

The government, however, is desperate for victories to divert attention from deteriorating living standards throughout the country. Following the capture of Pooneryn, it announced a week of flag-waving jingoism to “pay tribute to the war heroes”. President Rajapakse appeared on TV to hail the troops and call on LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran to immediately lay down his arms and come to the negotiating table.

The government’s celebrations evoke little response from ordinary working people, who are being forced to bear the economic burden of the war. Parliament is currently debating the 2009 budget which includes another hike in defence spending to an unprecedented 200 billion rupees (\$US1.8 billion) and further tax increases, including on basic food items. Inflation is currently running at around 30 percent.

Speaking in New Delhi, Rajapakse once again claimed to be “fighting terrorism while protecting Tamils” and declared that his government would provide a “political solution for the Tamils.” But the comments beg the question as to why such “a political solution” is necessary. The reality is that the 25-year communal war has been waged not to end “terrorism” but to maintain the dominance of the Sinhala ruling elites in Colombo over the island’s Tamil minority.

In presenting the budget on November 6, Rajapakse promised to implement a program of Uthuru Wasanthaya (Spring of North) after capturing the LTTE’s northern strongholds, similar to its policies after capturing the East. “After many decades there is an opportunity emerging to implement a development strategy that would bridge the north and south,” he boasted.

What the government has established in the East is a military occupation presided over by a provincial administration controlled by the notorious paramilitary outfit, the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP). “Development” has consisted of establishing fortified free trade zones to attract investors to exploit the local population as cheap labour. No doubt the same form of “liberation” will be imposed in the North.



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