

# Sri Lanka: Heavy fighting in battle for Kilinochchi

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Fierce fighting has continued this week as the Sri Lankan army presses its attack on the northern town of Kilinochchi, the administrative headquarters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in the Wanni region. Hundreds are likely dead and wounded as LTTE fighters resist at least four army divisions that have been flung into the battle.

Independent reporters are barred from the frontlines by both sides, which routinely exaggerate their successes on the battlefield. The pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* reported that 130 government soldiers had been killed and more than 300 injured in the heavy fighting on Tuesday at five locations around Kilinochchi. Another 40 soldiers were killed and 120 injured in a separate battle at Killali, further north on the Jaffna Peninsula.

The military claimed to have killed 120 LTTE rebels for the loss of 25 soldiers and to have captured LTTE defensive positions to the west and northwest of Kilinochchi and the village of Choikenkulam. Today's *Daily Mirror*, citing defence department sources, acknowledged that the LTTE had held onto key defensive positions on Tuesday and Wednesday and driven the army back from some of its captured positions.

All the army's claims have to be treated with suspicion. The *Sunday Times* political editor noted last weekend: "For well over four months now, it has been a case of going, going and going to Kilinochchi. When pro-rebel websites, both English and Tamil, claim guerrilla gains, re-capture of more villages in the Wanni are announced by the military. In the process, named are villages seized weeks earlier and publicised before. The public is confused with names of these hitherto unknown, and largely unfamiliar, villages and towns in the Wanni."

The army's propaganda underscores the desperation of the Sri Lankan government for victories over the LTTE.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, who narrowly won office in late 2005, plunged the country back to war in mid-2006, stirring up Sinhala communalism as a means of distracting from deepening social tensions. More than 70,000 people have been killed in this reactionary 25-year war to entrench the political dominance of the Sinhala ruling elite over the island's Tamil minority.

The battle for Kilinochchi may well mark a turning point in the war. Since 2006, the army has driven the LTTE out of its strongholds in the East and captured most of the western half of the Wanni region. Kilinochchi and the town of Mullativu on the north-eastern coast are the only major towns still under LTTE control. The fall of Kilinochchi on the main A9 highway, which connects the Jaffna peninsula to Colombo, would open the way for a concerted offensive to the east, dividing the LTTE's remaining forces.

Tuesday's offensive was the third major attack on Kilinochchi this month. The "Situation Report" in last weekend's *Sunday Times* noted that the LTTE has "further fortified their defences around Kilinochchi" and the advancing troops "fought fierce battles at two different locations on the outskirts of Kilinochchi" on November 10. "Following heavy resistance, they [military] later withdrew to their original positions."

The LTTE has built hidden bunkers inside their trenches, which have been used to ambush advancing government soldiers. Concentrated bombing and artillery barrages have proven ineffective against these bunkers. Many of the soldiers flung into the battle are raw recruits who have recently joined the army due to the lack of jobs. They have undoubtedly suffered the highest casualties.

The government and military top brass have insisted on pressing the offensive despite miserable conditions created by the onset of the north-east monsoon. Lakes infested with crocodiles have overflowed. Some parts of the battlefield

can be reached only by boats. The "Situation Report" noted that dry clothes were a luxury for troops while the provision of proper meals to the frontlines has become a major logistical problem.

Even from the scant information available, it is clear the war is taking a terrible toll. In an interview with the state-owned *Sunday Observer* on December 7, army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka explained that 16,000 soldiers had been injured by the LTTE's mortar and artillery attacks. While boasting that the military was in the final stages of winning the war, he mentioned in passing that the army had been authorised to make a massive expansion from 130,000 to 200,000 personnel.

Last weekend's *Sunday Leader* concluded that "the country has just endured the bloodiest year in its 25-year history of waging and surviving war". Based on defence department reports of LTTE and army casualties and media reports of the civilian deaths, the newspaper's journalists estimated the 10,500 people have died so far this year—twice the figure for 1995, the previous worst year.

The government's determination to black out details of the fighting is motivated by fears of an eruption of opposition, including in the army's own ranks. Despite media claims of majority support, there is widespread hostility to the war and its economic impact on working people. This sentiment, however, finds no expression within the political establishment in Colombo, where all major parties—government and opposition—support the war.

Speaking at a military ceremony last Saturday, Rajapakse bluntly declared that "neither chemical weapons, air attacks, suicide bombers, disastrous monsoon rains nor major floods can stop the military offensive". The government this week turned down an appeal by church leaders for a temporary truce over the Christmas/New Year period.

Rajapakse falsely declared that the war was a "battle for freedom and was never used to gain political mileage". In fact, his government has no other policy. Rajapakse, who sits atop a precarious parliamentary majority, has exploited the war to intimidate and silence critics as "traitors", denounce striking workers and protesting students for "undermining national security" and insist that working people have to bear the burdens of deteriorating living standards for the sake of the war. Any military reversal has the potential to trigger a political crisis in Colombo.

Rajapakse brags that he will bring *Uthura Wasanthaya*

(Spring for the North) like he brought *Negenahira Navodaya* (Awakening the East). However, the conditions in the East are a warning of what will happen in the North after "liberation". The eastern province is under army occupation and presided over by a chief minister who heads a pro-government breakaway LTTE group that is notorious for extortion, abduction and murder. Around 200,000 people displaced by previous fighting are still languishing in squalid refugee camps.

The Rajapakse regime, which increasingly rests on the military, will be just as ruthless in the Sinhala south against any opposition among working people to worsening social conditions produced by the war and the global economic crisis. That is the only conclusion that can be drawn from the fact that the government is increasing the size of the army by 50 percent to 200,000 soldiers, even as it claims to be winning the war.

As for the LTTE, its military setbacks have underscored the political bankruptcy of its separatist perspective. Far from defending the interests of ordinary Tamils, the LTTE from the outset has represented a layer of the Tamil elite that sought to establish a capitalist statelet in the North and East of the island with the backing of one or more of the major powers. Having been effectively isolated internationally by the US in particular, the LTTE leadership is reduced to making futile appeals to the same "international community" that is backing the war.

*Tamilnet* bitterly noted on December 6 that India had refused to pressure the Sri Lankan government to declare a ceasefire despite protests in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In fact, New Delhi is not only supporting Colombo's bogus "war on terror" politically but is quietly providing military assistance to the Sri Lankan army.



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