Sri Lankan military captures last LTTE town

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The Sri Lankan military announced on Sunday the capture of Puthukkudiyiruppu, the last remaining town controlled by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The battle is the latest in a string of defeats that have brought the LTTE to the brink of military collapse. The remaining LTTE fighters are now cornered in a government-declared no-fire zone—a strip of coastal land of about 17 square kilometres that is still under LTTE control.

Tens of thousands of civilian refugees are also crowded into the area, which, despite, government claims to the contrary, has been repeatedly subjected to army bombardment. Conditions inside the "no-fire zone" are appalling, with acute shortages of food, shelter and medicine. The military has allowed in only limited relief supplies.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has attempted to suppress and play down all news of the humanitarian disaster now unfolding. The government has blocked independent journalists from the area, along with most aid and human rights organisations. Its spokesmen have poured scorn on international aid agencies, which estimate that up to 200,000 civilians are trapped in the fighting.

Top UN humanitarian aid official John Holmes, however, continues to insist that between 150,000 and 190,000 civilians are trapped by the fighting. An internal UN report leaked to several news agencies put the minimum number of documented deaths between January 20 and March 7 in the northern Wanni region at 2,683, along with 7,241 injuries. Those figures translate into nearly 400 deaths and over a 1,000 injuries a week. "The number of people killed each day has doubled in one month," the unpublished report declared.

Most of the civilian casualties undoubtedly have been caused by the Sri Lankan military, which has an overwhelming superiority of firepower. Since the Rajapakse government re-launched the war in July 2006 in breach of the 2002 ceasefire, the military has repeatedly bombarded civilian areas as a tactic to terrorise and stampede the local population.

The battle for Puthukkudiyiruppu has been far more protracted than the government and the army initially predicted. According to military reports, 12,000 troops have been mobilised for the offensive, with another 40,000 soldiers cordoning off the area to prevent any LTTE breakout. Yet, far from being over in days, the operation has dragged on for more than a month, with the army confronting fierce LTTE resistance.

The defence ministry claimed that the army had killed 420 LTTE fighters in the three days prior to the capture of Puthukkudiyiruppu. Among the dead were said to be six senior LTTE military leaders, including Theepan, Gadafi and Vithusha.

The military stopped providing details of its own casualties last October, citing "security reasons". The real reason is mounting government concern over popular reaction against the war. Injured soldiers continue to pour into hospitals in and around Colombo. White flags—signifying the death of a soldier—have become an increasingly common sight in rural towns and villages. A WSWS team spoke to grieving relatives at seven funeral homes in southern villages over the past week.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is also the president's brother, told the BBC yesterday that the army had "no plans of going into the safe zone immediately. Our aim is to get the civilians safely out of the no-fire zone." However, in a separate announcement, the defence ministry claimed to have launched "a decisive tactical maneouvre to free hundreds of civilians held hostage by the LTTE".

These comments have nothing to do with any genuine concern for the trapped civilians. The government and the military treat all Tamils as the enemy and are incarcerating all fleeing civilians in detention camps. The main purpose of such expressions of concern is to deflect mounting international calls for a ceasefire.

Following a UN Security Council briefing on March 26, the US and Britain jointly called for a "humanitarian pause" to allow an evacuation of civilians. Like the Sri Lankan government, however, the two powers are not concerned about the plight of the civilians. Both countries tacitly supported the

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Rajapakse government's renewed war and abuse of democratic rights.

With the LTTE on the brink of military collapse, Washington is worried that a humanitarian bloodbath and the government's flagrant trampling on the rights of the Tamil minority will only lead to further political unrest in Sri Lanka and neighbouring India. The US has forged close economic and strategic relations with India over the past decade. India, which is worried about growing popular outrage in the southern state of Tamil Nadu over the war, is calling for a ceasefire.

President Rajapakse has flatly ruled out any ceasefire or pause in the fighting and on Sunday reiterated his demand for an unconditional surrender. However, while more extreme supporters of the war now speak of "an international conspiracy" to save the LTTE, the government is well aware of the necessity to keep its international allies onside. None of the major powers are calling for negotiations with the LTTE or a return to the so-called international peace process.

Campaigning in provincial council elections, Rajapakse has sought to use the war to whip up communal tensions. Obviously concerned about the implications of a vote against his government, the president declared: "If you take a wrong decision the international community would think that the government is on a war disapproved by the people."

The LTTE continues to issue appeals to the same "international community" that has backed Rajapakse's renewed war. The *Sunday Times* reported that LTTE political spokesman B. Nadesan recently phoned Eric Solheim, a former Norwegian special envoy for the defunct peace process. Nadesan reportedly declared: "The topmost priority now is an immediate ceasefire to put a stop to the massacre being carried out by the Sri Lankan forces."

Since the LTTE's formation in the 1970s, its perspective of a separate Tamil state in the North and East of Sri Lanka has always depended on obtaining the backing of one or more of the major powers. This separatist program represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not those of Tamil workers and farmers. The LTTE's contempt for ordinary working people is demonstrated by its refusal to allow Tamil civilians to flee the war zone to safety.

Among Tamil civilians, there are also justified fears that they will simply be stepping from the frying pan into the fire. Rajapakse is not waging a "war on terrorism" but continuing a communal conflict produced by decades of anti-Tamil discrimination and persecution at the hands of successive Colombo governments. The president's claim to be bringing "peace and harmony" to the island is belied by the fact that the "liberated East" is under heavy military occupation, presided over by the head of a notorious pro-government paramilitary.

The government is confronting a severe economic crisis produced by its huge expenditures on the war, now combined with the deepening global recession. Faced with an imminent balance of payments crisis, Rajapakse has been forced to turn to the IMF for a $1.9 billion loan—the largest in the country's history. While denying he will be forced to implement unpopular austerity measures, Rajapakse is already taking steps to satisfy the IMF.

In recent weeks, the government has increased duty on 10 essential items, halted public sector recruitment except for the armed forces, passed legislation to facilitate power privatisation and announced a wage freeze and measures to pave the way for the retrenchment of public sector workers. The Colombo media is rife with speculation that further austerity measures will be implemented after the provincial election on April 25.

In a column in last weekend's *Sunday Times*, the newspaper's political editor bluntly declared that the end of the war against the LTTE only signalled the start of a new "economic war". "The looming economic war might be an even more daunting task for Rajapakse to handle compared to the battle with the LTTE," he warned. While the writer did not spell out what he meant, the column clearly reflects deep fears in ruling circles that the economic crisis is setting the stage for a social explosion.

The comment underscores the real dangers confronting Sri Lankan workers. Far from the defeat of the LTTE bringing peace and prosperity, the government is preparing for a far-reaching assault on the social position of the working class, which has already been forced to bear the brunt of the war. The police-state apparatus that has been built up over 25 years under the guise of the "war on terrorism" will now be used to stamp out opposition and resistance by working people.

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