

Sri Lankan military continues shelling “no-fire zone”

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Sri Lankan troops have continued shelling the tiny area still held by Tamil separatists in the island’s north, killing and maiming scores more civilians, exposing the lie of the government’s assurance—issued only three days ago—that it would stop the use of aerial bombardment and heavy weapons.

On Monday, while refusing to heed international calls for a humanitarian ceasefire, President Mahinda Rajapakse’s regime offered what purported to be a small concession. It announced that “security forces have been instructed to end the use of heavy calibre guns, combat aircraft and aerial weapons which could cause civilian casualties”.

Within 24 hours, it was obvious that the pledge was a fraud. UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes said he had received reliable reports of “continuing attacks” by military forces. Holmes was backed by the Western diplomats in Colombo, the AFP reported.

Holmes had been in Colombo for talks with Rajapakse and his ministers to press for a ceasefire and a UN team to visit the war zone, where about 50,000 civilians are still trapped in an area of less than 10-square kilometres. The government rejected both requests, making clear its determination to proceed with its onslaught without any international observers, let alone aid agencies, near the army’s victims.

Speaking to the British-based *Telegraph* on Tuesday, Thangamuttu Sathyamurthi, a government doctor, said six patients were killed in a mortar attack on a hospital inside the “no-fire zone” where he was working. “I saw four dead bodies on the side of the road outside the hospital and two bodies in a trench,” he said. The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also accused the military of killing at least 11 people in the zone on Tuesday.

As always, the military flatly denied the accusations. Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara claimed: “We have not used any shelling or mortaring, only small arms. We know how we are fighting.”

Given the government’s record, these denials have no credibility

whatsoever. In fact, Monday’s statement promising not to use heavy weapons only exposed the government’s previous denials that it had not been using such weapons against civilians.

Over the past fortnight alone, doctors working in the area and aid agencies have accused the security forces of killing and injuring hundreds of civilians, taking the UN’s estimate of the toll to more than 6,500 dead and 14,000 injured in just three months.

From the military’s own claims, there has been no let-up in its operations since Monday. The army declared on Tuesday that it had entered Vellaimullivaikkal village, breaching a 500-metre earthen wall built by the LTTE to block advancing troops. The defence ministry said the LTTE had been restricted to a three-square kilometre area, and also reported that the navy had destroyed LTTE boats, killing 25 fighters.

Ominously, the army is now justifying attacks on civilians by claiming that LTTE members are fighting in plain clothes. Yesterday, *Bloomberg* reported Brigadier Shavendra Silva, commander of troops in the Mullaithivu area, saying “[N]ow the Tigers are fighting out of uniforms and it’s hard to distinguish between Tigers and civilians.” The statement only highlights the fact that the regime regards all Tamils as the enemy and targets in its war.

Reports have also emerged from the camps where at least 160,000 Tamils have been detained since fleeing the fighting. Aid workers who have visited the camps have testified to food shortages, lack of sanitation, a desperate medical situation and chronic overcrowding.

Of the children evacuated, about one in four was suffering from severe malnutrition, according to the UN. Human rights groups say there are reports of civilians dying before they could receive medical attention, underscoring the plight of those left behind.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around 140,000 refugees are in 32 camps in the Vavuniya area alone. UNHCR spokesman William Spindler told reporters on Tuesday: “The conditions at the sites have reached breaking point, placing severe strains on the humanitarian services available.” He said people without shelter were staying out in the

open in the blazing sun and sweltering heat.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said camps in Vavuniya were reportedly holding an average of 18 people per tent (designed for a family of five) with limited water supplies.

From the over-crowded Zone 2 in Vavuniya, Stein Lied, a protection adviser for Save the Children, wrote: “Children show pictures of their friends and families killed or injured or separated saying, ‘This is my friend he was killed, this is my friend, he’s now lost a leg, this is my brother, he’s now dead.’”

Many children were looking after younger ones because they had lost parents. Some injured children had not been treated yet. Lied continued: “Only a lucky few have tents in Zone 2—others are sleeping on the ground or under trees. So far only simple food and water has been distributed.”

The Sri Lankan government is intent on annihilating the LTTE, confident that it need not worry about the response of the foreign powers that have been appealing for a halt to the offensive. These powers are hypocritically expressing concern for the plight of Tamils after tacitly backing Rajapakse and his war since 2006.

The US and EU have urged Rajapakse to seek a “political solution” by holding talks with sections of the Tamil elite. Their primary motivation is to prevent continuing instability in the strategically located island, as well as the neighbouring Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which is home to 60 million Tamils.

An EU delegation, including British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner visited Colombo yesterday, but their pleas for a ceasefire fell on deaf ears. At a media conference, Miliband even expressed his admiration for the military, saying its advances over the previous six months had been “striking,” while advising the government that “winning the peace is as vital as winning the war”.

Asked about the Rajapakse government’s rejection of their ceasefire calls, Kouchner said: “We insisted and we insisted, but it is up to our friends to allow it or not.” In other words, France, Britain and the other major power intend to take no action to prevent their “friends” from carrying out further atrocities in the North.

The Sri Lankan government refused a visa for Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt to join the EU delegation. Sweden was among the Scandinavian countries that served on the monitoring committee established in 2002 to oversee the ceasefire agreement between Colombo and the LTTE. After Rajapakse openly breached the ceasefire agreement in 2006, tensions arose with these countries because in some instances they criticised the military’s atrocities.

The entire Colombo political establishment has rallied to oppose

any ceasefire with the LTTE. The Buddhist extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a coalition partner in the Rajapakse government, yesterday picketed the British High Commission protesting Miliband’s visit. A JHU leader, Udaya Gammanpila, called Miliband “a representative of terrorists,” saying he was “here to help [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran”.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) on Tuesday accused the government of bowing to international pressure and of preparing to grant amnesty to LTTE leaders. JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe even told a news conference that the government had declared a ceasefire. The JVP, which was in the forefront of urging Rajapakse to resume the war, is deliberately inflaming tensions to retain its Sinhala communalist constituency.

At another press conference on Tuesday, Tissa Attanayake, general secretary of the right-wing United National Party (UNP), demanded a continuation of the fighting in order to “eliminate terrorism as otherwise its remnants would raise their ugly heads in the future”.

Since the Rajapakse government resumed the war, the UNP has repudiated its previous effort, backed by the major powers and big business, to initiate a “peace process” with the LTTE. In 2002, a UNP government signed a ceasefire and to involve the LTTE as a junior partner in a settlement designed to end the destabilising two-decades-old civil war and implement open market policies to transform Sri Lanka into a cheap labour platform.

The Sri Lankan elite’s reversion to outright militarism is in line with its underlying record since Britain granted it independence in 1949. Time and again, it has resorted to bloody communalism to split the masses, Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim, and undermine a unified struggle to defend their living standards. Under conditions of a deepening economic crisis, the Colombo political establishment is again resorting to the same reactionary methods.



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