

Sri Lankan “ceasefire” sets stage for bloody assault

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A two-day unilateral “ceasefire” declared by the Sri Lankan government in the narrow, 17-square kilometre, strip of land still controlled by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the island’s north has set the stage for a final push by some 50,000 soldiers to attempt to wipe out the LTTE militarily.

Due to expire today, the 48-hour halt was a cynical manoeuvre to appease international pressure for a truce and to blame the LTTE for the mounting civilian casualties that will only escalate once the military offensive resumes. The government demanded that the LTTE surrender and “release” civilians from the war zone. An estimated 100,000 Tamil civilians remain trapped in the area, where they have been subjected to weeks of bombing and shelling by the army.

President Mahinda Rajapakse’s regime rejected calls by foreign governments, including British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, to consider a longer halt to the fighting. The Colombo government is not interested in any diplomatic efforts to reach a “political solution”—which would mean a settlement with sections of the Tamil elite. Instead, Rajapakse and the military commanders are determined to exterminate the remaining LTTE forces.

For its part, the LTTE has repeatedly requested a ceasefire guaranteed by the same “international community” that has supported Rajapakse’s war. It is still hoping for a deal brokered by the major powers, and is quite prepared to use the civilians caught in the fighting as bargaining chips in the process.

Sporadic fighting continued during the two-day ceasefire, which the LTTE rejected as a “hoodwink”. Before the halt, the military shamelessly described its advance into the “no fire zone” as “the largest hostage rescue operation in the world,” falsely claiming to be concerned about the plight of Tamil refugees. In reality, any civilians escaping the fighting have been interned in large military-run detention camps.

On April 5, the military announced its capture of

Puthukkudiyiruppu, the last remaining town controlled by the LTTE, and then commenced its assault on the “no fire zone,” which the government had previously declared a safe haven for civilians. Last Friday, the military claimed that it had killed nine LTTE fighters on the edge of the zone. It did not mention any casualties among its own soldiers. The military stopped reporting its casualties last October, fearing that the rising toll among soldiers would fuel public opposition to the deeply unpopular war.

Citing reports from the “no-fire zone”, the *Guardian* in Britain said that at least 128 civilians had died and more than 700 had been injured in three days of shelling, from April 7 to 9. On Friday, after speaking to doctors working at a makeshift hospital at Putumattalan inside the zone, the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) said civilian casualties were “skyrocketing”. HRW Asia director Brad Adams described the zone as “one of the most dangerous places in the world”.

The organisation accused both the military and the LTTE of violating international law, blaming government forces for firing into the area and accusing the LTTE of not allowing civilians to leave the area.

HRW quoted a 35-year-old witness to a shell attack on hundreds of people waiting for food to be distributed on April 8. “It was early in the morning,” he said. “I heard the first shell, and hit the ground. Then several more landed nearby, after three or four minutes. I survived by miracle, but my 45-year-old uncle died on the spot—he lost both legs.

“Now I am staying in the hospital with my wife and child, because we have nowhere else to go and the hospital may be the safest place. But there is also no place to stay here. There are so many injured people, and the new injured are being brought here all the time as we speak.”

HRW reported that a doctor had found 120mm rounds at the site of an April 8 attack, and said the doctor noted that the rounds appeared to have come from Sri Lankan army positions. The doctor complained to HRW that he and other medical staff

had been threatened by the authorities for providing information to the media.

“We decided that we are beyond the point where we can just complain to the authorities,” the doctor said. “Because we told them a hundred times and they have failed to take any proper steps to stop the attack on civilians and did not send in the necessary amount of medications. We have been reporting every day, every day providing reports to relevant authorities and to the international community, and still there are no real steps taken to save these innocent civilians.”

The government responded to these eye-witness accounts—as it has with every previous report of civilian casualties—with an outright denial of any firing into the “no-fire zone” and a dismissal of all reports as LTTE propaganda. Without providing any evidence, Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva dismissed the doctors’ accounts as “exaggerations” made under “pressure” from the LTTE.

The government has barred independent journalists as well as most aid and human rights organisations from the area, with the obvious aim of blocking any news on mounting civilian casualties.

Britain, the US, India and other powers are worried that a further bloodbath of civilians would deepen the political instability in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Co-chairs of the now defunct Sri Lankan “peace process”—the US, EU, Norway and Japan—last week called for a conference to discuss “how best to end the futile fighting without further bloodshed”.

On Friday, US Assistant Secretary of State of South Asia Richard Boucher “emphasised US concern about the plight of the civilians trapped in the ‘no fire zone’ in northern Sri Lanka and urged [Sri Lankan] Foreign Secretary Kohona to protect civilians”, according to the State Department. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon had a telephone conversation with Rajapakse on Thursday, reportedly also expressing concerns about the civilian situation.

The major powers, including the Co-chairs, have tacitly backed Rajapakse’s renewed war against the LTTE since 2006. The US has provided continuous military support with equipment, training and intelligence. For all its hypocritical concerns about the “plight of civilians,” Washington simply fears that a civilian massacre could destabilise India and cut across US economic and strategic interests in the region.

Tamil bourgeois politicians in India have felt compelled to heighten their rhetoric against the Rajapakse government, seeking to boost their popular support on the eve of national

elections from April 16 to May 13.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, addressing a Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (DMK) party rally on Thursday, warned Rajapakse against the thought of “annihilating” Tamils, saying that if he did so, “history would never forgive him”. Karunanidhi remains an ally of the Congress-led central Indian government, which has been quietly backing Rajapakse’s war.

Vaiko, the leader of the Marumalarachchi Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (MDMK), a pro-LTTE party in Tamil Nadu, said that “any harm caused to LTTE leader Prabhakaran would lead to a bloodbath in Tamil Nadu”. The state police have announced that they will file a case against Vaiko over his remarks.

Indian Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram said New Delhi had made “some strong demands to Sri Lanka to stop the war” and was also “pressing the LTTE to stop the war”. He made these remarks following a high-level meeting that included Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, the national security advisor and the foreign secretary.

Chidambaram’s statement underscores New Delhi’s dilemma. While sharing the Rajapakse government’s desire to crush the LTTE, it has been forced to limit its military backing for Rajapakse due to various political considerations. The ruling Congress party has concerns that a more open identification with the war would undermine support for itself and its allies like the DMK, particularly in the national elections.

All of these squalid political calculations could be thrown into disarray as the Sri Lankan army resumes its attacks on the “no fire” zone.



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