Sri Lankan army slaughters LTTE leaders

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Sri Lankan state television announced yesterday that leaders of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), including its chief V. Prabhakaran, had been killed by the army in fighting for the last small piece of LTTE territory. Among the other leaders who died were the LTTE's intelligence chief Pottu Amman, B. Nadesan and S. Puleedevan.

Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara announced that Prabhakaran had been killed in a fight in the early hours of Monday and that another 250 LTTE fighters died in the final battle. Another military source told the Associated Press that the LTTE leader had attempted to flee in an armour-plated van accompanied by a bus filled with LTTE fighters. Prabhakaran's body, which was reportedly badly burned, is to be subjected to DNA testing for identification.

The pro-LTTE Tamilnet has challenged the military's account accusing the army of carrying out a "determined massacre" of LTTE leaders. An official LTTE statement announced on Sunday that the LTTE would "silence its guns" to prevent the further loss of civilian lives. According to Tamilnet, LTTE political wing leader B. Nadesan had pressed for an evacuation by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Hours later Prabhakaran, Nadesan and other LTTE leaders were dead.

There is no independent account of what took place as the Sri Lankan government and military have banned on journalists, aid workers and other observers from the war zone. However, it cannot be ruled out in the climate of communal hysteria being whipped up by the Colombo government that the army wreaked its vengeance on the remaining LTTE leaders and fighters in part to cover up its war crimes.

Certainly, the latest postings on the Sri Lankan army's web site contain a certain gruesome gloating. An article entitled "More and more Tiger top rung leaders confirmed decimated" declared the army had "confirmed the death of 11 more senior LTTE terrorists who attempted to escape their destiny". Another headed "Two more terrorist 'Masters' and Jeyam bumped off" announced the killing of two more "senior LTTE terrorists".

In the wake of the LTTE's defeat, the political establishment in Colombo has come together to attempt to whip up an artificial atmosphere of jubilation. The main opposition parties—the United National Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have congratulated the army and the government over the victory. Army Commander, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka declared on state television: "The Sri Lankan armed forces have militarily defeated the LTTE and freed the nation from three decades of terror."

The 26-year conflict was not, however, a "war on terror" but a communal war to establish the political supremacy of Sinhala ruling elite and to divide the working class. The final onslaught over the past week on the remaining few square kilometres held by the LTTE was carried out with criminal disregard for the lives of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians caught in the fighting. As far as the army was concerned, all Tamils were potential enemies.

In the final three days of fighting since last Thursday, tens of thousands of people fled the area. Defence ministry photos showed defenceless people crowded together, seeking to escape with small bundles of belongings on their heads. Video footage revealed scenes of utter devastation—ruined buildings, bombed out vehicles and smouldering weaponry.

In an act of political vindictiveness, three government doctors—Thangamutha Sathiyamoorthy, Thurairaja Varatharajah and V. Shanmugarajah—who maintained a makeshift hospital inside the LTTE's pocket of territory have been detained and handed over to police. A health ministry spokesman told the Associated Press that the police were questioning the doctors with a view to charging them for disseminating false information.

For weeks, the doctors have been bitterly attacked by the Colombo government and the media for providing details of the hundreds of casualties caused by indiscriminate army shelling. The hospital itself was shelled twice last week. Government spokesmen first denied that the doctors even existed, then accused them of mouthing LTTE propaganda.

The UN, however, insisted that the doctors have provided accurate information. UN humanitarian chief John Holmes yesterday urged the government to treat them properly. "These are people who performed absolutely heroically in the last few weeks and months and deserve every praise and care—not anything else," he said.

The government and military are clearly intent on covering up all evidence of their war crimes. Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe cynically declared yesterday. "There was no bloodbath as some people feared. Everybody has come out safely

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and they are being looked after by the government."

In fact, the opposite is the case. According to a leaked UN report, 7,000 civilians were killed and 16,700 injured in fighting from January 20 to May 7. An estimated 1,000 died, many from army shelling, in the subsequent week and an unknown number in the past four days. Most of the casualties occurred inside the government's so-called no-fire zone.

Describing the situation last weekend inside the LTTE territory, UNICEF spokesman James Elder declared: "It is hard to think of a worse place on earth to be right now than on that stretch of beach. It is a bloodbath. It is a catastrophic situation. We are seeing a complete disregard for civilian life." He said that trapped civilians faced "indiscriminate firing from all sides."

Elder explained: "When you look at the state of the first people to leave three weeks ago, there were malnourished children and women, and people with gunshot wounds and shrapnel injuries, and these people now have been there for another three weeks with next to nothing to eat in terrible conditions. It is going to be a nightmare."

The ICRC reported yesterday that it had been trying to get to the war zone for nine days without success and expressed concern that the wounded were not being treated. Only those able to walk have left the area. The agency explained that it had been unable to contact 25 of its local staff since Sunday morning.

ICRC director of operations Pierre Krähenbühl said: "Under international humanitarian law, the lives of all those who are not or are no longer fighting must be spared. Wounded and sick people must be collected and cared for immediately, and detainees must be treated humanely. This is all the more urgent since no humanitarian aid has reached those who need it for over a week."

A UNHRC statement yesterday put the number of civilians to emerge from the no-fire zone over the past few days at 65,000. The total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have been herded into military-controlled detention camps in recent months, is now at least 265,000. The UNHCR warned that the new influx would "put an even greater strain on the transit and IDP sites that are already buckling under the pressure of the existing IDP population."

The UNHCR complained that the army had "greatly curtailed access" to the centres, which lacked sufficient food and other basics. The agency called for more land to be set aside to put up new shelters to improve conditions in the 42 camps. These detention centres are fenced with razor wire and guarded by armed troops. The internees are not permitted to leave. The sick and wounded are crowded into hospitals and many have not been treated.

The humanitarian disaster in Sri Lanka has resulted in a number of hypocritical statements from the major powers expressing concern about the plight of Tamil civilians. A meeting of European Union foreign ministers yesterday called for an independent war crimes investigation into the killing of civilians in Sri Lanka and "a political solution" to end the conflict.

The US State Department also called for "the government [in Colombo] to engage the Tamils, Sinhalese and other Sri Lankans to create a political arrangement that promotes and protects the rights of all Sri Lankan." Spokesman Ian Kelly declined to say whether Washington intended to carry out its threat to hold up a $1.9 billion IMF loan for Sri Lanka. The US and Britain have been using the loan as a lever to pressure Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to accept their demands.

These appeals for a "political solution" are a tacit recognition that the protracted conflict was not a "war on terror" but the product of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination by successive Colombo governments. While the LTTE has been defeated as a fighting force, the US and European powers know that none of the underlying political issues are resolved and fear that communal tensions will lead to ongoing instability in Sri Lanka and also neighbouring India.

Neither the US nor the EU has any intention of pursuing President Rajapakse and his ministers for the war crimes for which they are responsible. For two and a half years, these governments have been silent as Rajapakse resumed the war in mid-2006 in breach of the 2002 ceasefire and gave free rein to the army in its murderous "war on terror". If concerns about Tamil civilians are now being belatedly raised, it is to pressure the Rajapakse regime and to advance US and European interests in postwar Sri Lanka.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka warns that this "victory" will be the beginning of a new onslaught on the social position of the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—as the Rajapakse government confronts the country's deepening economic crisis. The SEP gives no political support to the LTTE and its communal program of Tamil separatism. However, the ruthlessness with which the military slaughtered LTTE leaders and fighters, along with Tamil civilians, in recent weeks is a sharp warning of the anti-democratic measures that will be used to deal with any opposition from working people to its economic offensive.

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