

Fierce offensive continues in northern Sri Lanka

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6 May 2009

Despite Sri Lankan government claims last week of an end to combat operations and the use of heavy weapons, the army is continuing to press into the remaining small sliver of land in the north east of the island held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The Sri Lankan defence ministry reported on Monday that troops were moving in on three sides—from the north, south and west—after breaking through an earthen barrier on Sunday. The coastline is heavily patrolled by the navy. According to the military, the LTTE holds only 4.5 square kilometres of land.

The ministry gave no indication of casualties on either side, simply declaring that the army had encountered “stiff resistance”. As for the estimated 50,000 civilians trapped in the war zone, the military top brass and the government treat their fate with indifference, blaming all casualties on the LTTE.

UN spokeswoman Marie Okabe said yesterday: “According to reports from those remaining inside the conflict zone, fighting has intensified with both light and heavy weapons being used.”

The government and the military maintain a complete ban on any independent reporting from the area and have barred visitors to the detention camps in which around 180,000 refugees have been interned. Despite the media embargo, reports of the horrific conditions inside the remaining LTTE territory continue to filter out.

Government medical official Dr. Thurairaja Varatharajah, who works at a makeshift hospital inside the government’s self-declared “no-fire zone” that was shelled on Sunday, told Associated Press that the area had

again been bombarded on Monday. This time, Sri Lankan naval vessels fired scores of shells as starved families crowded around the shore to buy fish from returning fishermen.

Varatharajah said a father and daughter who lived near his home were killed by a shell as they headed to a well to wash themselves. He said there was no accurate count of the number of dead and wounded, because the hospital registrar had been injured in Sunday’s attack. The military has blocked the entry of basic supplies of food and medicines into the no-fire zone, creating desperation among trapped civilians.

A further indication of the unfolding humanitarian disaster was provided by reports from refugees who risked their lives to escape by boat to neighbouring southern India. The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a report yesterday of one harrowing journey. With nothing to eat and only saltwater to drink, nearly half of those who had initially boarded the boat, died or jumped overboard before it arrived in India last week.

S. Indra Kumar told HRW that his family had originally moved to the no-fire zone because they thought they would be safe there but fled to India by boat in late April. “We were living in such fear. There was constant shelling. On April 6, our neighbours were injured in the shelling. A shell landed inside the bunker. Ten people were injured, and of them, five died. There was no anaesthesia. The doctors had to cut off a girl’s hand without anaesthesia. My small daughter was crying and scared. I decided then that we had to leave,” he said.

His brother, S. Indra Meenan, said the LTTE had fired at times from areas close to where the civilians were

living, putting them at risk of retaliatory fire. “We left [by boat] on April 20 because we were scared. There was so much bombing and shelling. Every day, at least three or four hours, there was shelling. The firing was coming from the Sri Lankan army.”

S. Indra Kumar described the shortages in the no-fire zone. “The government was sending some grain. But if the need was for 100 kilos, they were sending 25 kilos. There were no NGOs [non-government organisations], no medicines inside.”

The boat owner, Mariyada Yesudas, said his father, sister, nephew, two brothers and uncle, the boat captain, died during the journey after they ran out of fuel. He described the desperate situation: “The army was really close. The LTTE was also very close. We thought the fighting had reached us. So we decided to leave before it was too late.”

Only a tiny proportion of the Tamil war refugees have managed to reach southern India by boat. Nearly 200,000 are being held in squalid Sri Lankan government-run “welfare centres” guarded by security forces and surrounded by razor wire. The mass internment speaks volumes about the chauvinist attitude of the government and the military toward the island’s Tamil minority. Not just the LTTE, but the Tamil population as a whole is regarded as the enemy.

President Mahinda Rajapakse and his ministers insist that the refugees are being properly treated, but have taken steps to prevent any independent reporting from inside the camps. A report by the British-based Channel 4 television gave a rare glimpse of conditions at a “welfare centre” near the town of Vavuniya. The journalists had managed to smuggle a camera into the camp and interview people without being escorted by soldiers.

Refugees spoke to Channel 4 of the plight of families that had been split up—husbands from wives, children from their parents—and the lack of food, water and medicine. An aid worker explained that a mother unable to feed her children had begged him for food, but he had none to give. A refugee explained that several children had died in a stampede for food. Another said: “We don’t have a life here. This is a jail.”

One purpose of the centres is to filter out anyone

suspected of any connection with the LTTE. Those who spoke to Channel 4 were fearful for their lives. People were simply being “disappeared” by the military, which acted with impunity inside the camp. There had also been cases of young women being abducted and sexually abused by the guards. After three young women were found dead at a bathing pool, the UN called on the male soldiers around the area to be replaced by female police officers.

Like all its other crimes and abuses, the government has denied any sexual assaults or “disappearances”. Over the past three years of war, hundreds of people—mainly Tamils—have disappeared or been murdered by pro-government death squads operating with the complicity of the security forces. No one has been found guilty or punished in any of these cases.

President Rajapakse has rejected all international appeals for even a limited ceasefire to assist civilians trapped in the war. In response to a high-level visit last week by British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, he declared: “I don’t need lectures from Western representatives.”

Britain and France, along with the US and other Western powers, have backed Rajapakse’s war for the past three years. They are intervening not to protect Tamil civilians, but their own strategic and economic interests in the region. Rajapakse’s response, however, makes clear that no amount of international pressure is going to stop his government from waging this vicious, communal war to the bitter end, regardless of the terrible cost in civilian lives.



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