

MONITOR

The Focus on Sri Lanka - Tamil Conflict

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SINHALA MILITARY OCCUPATION AND UNATTAINABLE PEACE

The conflict in Sri Lanka seems to be entering another phase in its prolonged history.

On the 26th of July 2006, the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) breached the Cease-fire agreement (CFA) it signed in 2002 with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), by deciding to use its armed forces (SLAF) to achieve a military objective in the eastern port district of Trincomalee.

Since July 26th, LTTE administered areas in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Vanni regions have been repeatedly attacked by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF). These offensives were commenced with aerial bombing, artillery attacks, and troop intrusion on land into the LTTE controlled areas in eastern Muttur and Ecchilampathu in the Trincomalee district. The

LTTE resisted this offensive by using their artilleries and some limited military manoeuvres. Later, this land war has spread into Northern part of the Island.

More than 500 combatants have perished in these battles. The humanitarian consequences of these battles have been well documented by the UN agencies and other INGOs operating in these areas. More than 200,000 new Internally Displaced People (IDP) have been added to the already existing IDP in unconscionable numbers. Attacks on 3 churches (Muttur, Kattaiyadu and Allaipitty) sheltering IDP, aerial bombing and killing of 51 school girls and the brutal execution-style killing of 17 Tamil aid workers of a French aid agency (ACF) have received worldwide condemnation.

Mavilaru Crisis

"..To spotlight the grave injustice meted out to the Tamil people, water distribution line through LTTE held Mavilaru to GoSL controlled areas has been blocked since July 22 by the people of the area," according to Local LTTE Leader Elilan. The Sri Lankan Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Ministry earlier proposed to construct water towers for the supply of drinking water to villages in the Muttur west and Serunuwara division in GoSL controlled territory and also to construct such towers in the LTTE controlled Muttur East to provide water supply to villages, Pattalipuram, Pallikudiruppu, Malaimunthal and other remote hamlets which are suffering without proper drinking water facility. But, the GoSL authorities went on with other plans. "They were not interested in providing water facility to the people in the Muttur East," Elilan charged. This had angered the Tamil civilians who blocked the water supply in protest, Elilan further said. ..On July 26m SLAF Kfir jets, , bombed the area where Mavilaru water supply line goes through LTTE territory. "This is a blatant violation of ceasefire violation," Elilan said. He has lodged a complaint to the SLMM. (Tamilnet 26.07.06)



(Interview with European head of the Cease Fire Monitors, Retired major general of the Swedish Army, Ulf Henricsson)
Q: What are your views on the water crisis? Could it have been resolved a different way?

A: I think that the importance of the water was exaggerated a lot. Of course it was bad but it was definitely not 30,000 acres which was in the short term dependent on this water. And the crops could have done definitely much more days without water. So I think there were several days for negotiation without launching an attack. And I am definitely rejecting the government's claim that this was a humanitarian operation, because an operation that causes some hundred deaths and 30,000 refugees is not a humanitarian one. I understand the military reasons for it, but don't call it a humanitarian operation. (The Nation, August 20, 2006)

The Co-chairs of the peace process namely, the USA, EU, Japan and Norway after maintaining a surprising silence for a period, issued a belated statement calling both parties to halt the hostilities and resume negotiations. However, this statement failed to condemn either the gross breach of the CFA by the GoSL or the war crimes committed against the civilians by the SLAF.

A creative and impartial approach is needed if the current escalation of the conflict is to be halted and to take both the parties to the negotiating table.

The IFT monitor attempts below to analyse how the renewed call by the international community for resumption of negotiations for a peaceful settlement of this conflict is possible at this juncture.

Trincomalee offensive

This offensive was started ostensibly to open the sluice gates of the Mavil River that was temporarily blocked by the Tamil people living in the LTTE controlled areas denying irrigation water for the SLAF occupied areas. The Tamil people wanted to demonstrate their grievances regarding a drinking water crisis in their areas, by temporarily blocking the sluice gate. But the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) decided to use its armed forces to engage this conflict.

SLAF started the offensive just as this civilian dispute was being settled with the help of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM). Sri Lankan air-force dropped a bomb in the vicinity of the meeting place where SLMM chief Maj. Gen. Ulf Henricsson and LTTE officials were meeting with civilian representatives to resolve the conflict.

It cannot be a coincidence that this offensive was started on the same day the Sri Lankan military commander Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka, a hawk, resumed duties after being injured in a failed assassination attempt, blamed on the LTTE.

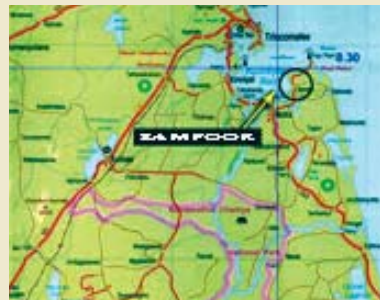
A local Buddhist monk has stated that a resolution to the water dispute was on hand, and

described the offensive unwarranted [Daily Mirror 1 Aug 2006]. The SLMM chief Henricsson criticized the military offensive stating, "It is definitely the wrong method. It is definitely overkill if you want the water". [Reuters 1 Aug 2006].

Tommy Lekenmyr the Chief of staff of the SLMM office in Colombo put it more succinctly when told the Reuters "The Tigers said they would re-open it but as the head of the unarmed Nordic-staffed ceasefire monitoring mission, retired Swedish Major General Ulf Henricsson, headed towards the sluice south of the northeastern port of Trincomalee, army artillery opened fire. It is quite obvious they are not interested in water. They are interested in something else. We will blame this on the government."

President Declares the Capture of Sampur at the 55th anniversary celebrations of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)

source: Defence Ministry Colombo 03.09.06



HE the President Mahinda Rajapaksa who is also the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces made a special announcement at the 55th anniversary celebrations of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) established by the late Prime Minister of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) Mr. S.W.R.D Bandaranaike held at the Bandaranaike International Conference Hall that the Armed forces had taken complete control of SAMPUR.

It is quite evident that this military offensive, in violation of the CFA, has ulterior motives. We believe that it is aimed at consolidation of the armed occupation of the Trincomalee district to sever the contiguity of the Tamil homelands. The GoSL used the water issue as an opportunity advance its military strategy against the Tamil interests.

GoSL's assumptions and the ground reality

It appears that this military offensive, codenamed 'operation watershed', was commenced on the basis of a perceived weakness



of the part of the LTTE, especially in the east. The defection of Karnua, an ex-LTTE commander, it is assumed, has weakened the LTTE's military capabilities. The SLAF's military build-up during the ceasefire adds to this mindset.

This is a dangerous line of thinking as has been shown in the current as well as earlier military confrontations with the LTTE. During the current clash the LTTE forces were able to overpower the SLAF in the GoSL controlled area of Muttur, hold the area for a few days, and then withdraw in deference to the CFA.

Further escalation

As long as the GoSL believes in its ability to militarily weaken or defeat the LTTE, the risk of resumption of full-scale war remains high. The three periods of war prior to the February 2002 CFA has shown how this line of thinking can sink the country back to prolonged strife. If the aerial strikes and the human casualties continue the LTTE will be forced to strike back, resulting in full-scale war.

Clichés such as, the SLAF is involved 'defensive operations' while 'abiding by the CFA', may hoodwink the international community in the short-run, but the danger of a catastrophic war is real.

Is there an alternative to full scale war?

Since the election of President Rajapakse the situation in Sri Lanka has worsened considerably. This is because of his alliance with extremist parties such as the JVP and JHU. The policies of this alliance are retrograde, as evident from the election promises made in the 'Mahinda Chinthanaya' (Mahinda's thoughts) published just prior to the

November 2005 Presidential election. Highlights include promises to expel Norway from its facilitator role and to cancel the CFA.

Previous attempts to find a negotiated settlement failed primarily due such intransigent policies of successive governments of Sri Lanka. This inflexibility stems from the GoSL's evident reliance on its armed forces resolve the conflict. Many opportunities were lost due to GoSL's use of its armed forces in this conflict. Armed police was used in 1956 to break-up a peaceful protest. The military was brought in 1961 to break-up another peaceful exercise. Since then the GoSL has rapidly increased its use of armed forces. The more recent attempts at settlement were thwarted

The GoSL aggression in Sampur

- Trincomalee LTTE Political Head Elilan -

Trincomalee LTTE Political Head Elilan has lodged a complaint with the SLMM about GoSL aggression in Sampur. In the complaint he asks why the SLMM is keeping silent in the face of 97 civilians killed, 215 civilians injured, 46,000 civilians displaced, homes and other public buildings destroyed, crops destroyed and livestock killed.

The GoSL started the war of occupation of Sampur on 28 August, with no concern about the ceasefire agreement. GoSL is now gleefully celebrating the destruction it wrought on the people of Sampur.

Why is SLMM quiet in the face of this arrogance of the GoSL to commit atrocities against civilians asked Elilan.

(1985, 1990, 1994, etc.) by mainly by the actions of the SLAF. The current episode in Trincomalee is another prime example.

The international peace-brokers need to understand the negative influence SLAF exerts on the peace process. A de-escalation of armed conflict and a movement towards a peaceful settlement can be achieved only if the international community insists on a removal in the SLAF occupation in the Tamil homelands. Since the Sri Lanka government agreed with the international community to find a peaceful solution to the conflict there is no justification for an army occupation in the Tamil homelands.