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FRESH FIGHTING CLAIMS 1,000 LIVES IN NORTH-EAST

THE fragile peace between the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) disintegrated in early June, when growing tension between the police and the LTTE flared into full-scale warfare.

A marital dispute, which led to a Muslim tailor being beaten up in a Batticaloa police station on 10 June, touched off Tiger attacks on 15 police stations in the East and the killing of ten Sri Lankan soldiers at Kalmunai.

Fighting quickly spread north to Trincomalee, where Tiger units attacked Palampattar bridge, and to Kilinochchi army base which withstood a four-day siege. Two ceasefires, called for 13 and then 16 June broke down after "unprovoked attacks" by the Tigers and "large-scale troop movements" by the Army and it was clear that the talking was over.

Three Army divisions were airlifted East and after four days of savage fighting regained nominal control of the urban centres of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. But the Tigers hold the countryside and the conflict looks set to sink into a familiar pattern of guerrilla attacks and Army reprisals. Nine soldiers were killed and another five injured in a LTTE landmine attack outside Trincomalee on 23 June.

In the North, Mannar passed quickly into LTTE hands but the Army still holds Jaffna fort after a ten-day siege. The LTTE has also attacked naval bases on Karainagar and Kaytes. Joint Indian and Sri Lankan naval patrols have sealed off the Palk Strait, the Tigers supply route to south India, and only 28 refugees have reached Tamil Nadu.

Both sides have been accused of atrocities. A police Sub-Inspector says 110 of the 600 policemen captured by the Tigers in the East were lined up and shot. Over 100 Tamils were allegedly massacred by the Army near Amparai Central Camp. Some 24 Sinhalese taken off a train near Batticaloa by the Tigers were also reported killed and the Tigers accused of using chemical weapons in a week long siege at Kiran.

After the Tigers killed 32 policemen at Kinniya many of the Tamil areas of Trincomalee have been burned down by the advancing Army and known LTTE sympathisers killed. The city remains under curfew. Around 1000 people have died in ten days fighting including many civilians killed when helicopter gunships strafed Batticaloa town.

Over 100,000 people are now said to be displaced by the fighting. Tension is high in Colombo, where over 700 Tamils have been taken into custody. Observers are still undecided whether the Tiger offensive was deliberate or a misreading of an increasingly volatile situation. Some say LTTE leader Prabhakaran feared losing control over his rank-and-file jungle fighters now visibly impatient with the negotiating process. Others point to the unpredictable 21-year old LTTE Batticaloa leader Karikalan whose spark of anger touched off a forest fire. Peace talks already seem part of a distant past.