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## Stalemate in Mullaitivu

AS THE SIEGE of the Jaffna peninsula entered its sixth month, Sri Lankan forces launched a major offensive in isolated Mullaitivu District on the secret jungle bases of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

On 16 March, after reports of a heavy LTTE buildup near a remote Army post at Kokkuthoduvaai north of Kokkilai lagoon, 3,000 Sri Lankan troops attacked a string of Tiger satellite camps, part of a 14-base complex evacuated after an Army offensive last September. Sri Lankan forces used bulldozers and their new lightweight T85 tanks to crash through the dense jungle while gunboats shelled LTTE positions from offshore.

After ten days of fierce fighting the Army captured nine deserted LTTE camps and substantial food and ammunition stocks. Defence sources say 40 soldiers died in *Operation Sixer* and claim 100 Tigers were killed, citing LTTE radio intercepts. Reports from Anuradhapura say between 50 and 100 soldiers were wounded in the attack and there is a shortage of hospital beds and blood.

The Tigers say they lost 37 cadres and that their new anti-tank recoil-less rifles destroyed three T85 tanks. There are no independent reports of the fighting. The offensive was accompanied by aerial bombing of civilian areas around Nedunkerni, Omanthai and Oddusuddan and people have fled surrounding villages. Casualties are unknown.

The operation pushes the Army's Forward Defence Line, a 70-mile chain of camps and bunkers across northern Vavuniya, a further four kms into the Weli Oya jungles. Army bases at Janakapura and Gajabapura, west of Kokkilai

guard the northernmost reaches of Sinhalese farming settlements, reviled by the Tigers as "colonisation" of Manal Aru, a traditionally Tamil area.

The surrounding Vanni jungles are vital to the Tigers' survival, housing secret bases and storehouses while keeping open the link to the east. The Army will not make the same mistake as the Indian Peace Keeping Force in 1987 and rush headlong into Jaffna while the Tigers regroup in the Vanni. It means to cut off their escape routes first but it may be a long and painful process.

The Army's other strategy seeks to decapitate the Tigers, literally and symbolically, using superior air power to blast suspected hideouts of elusive LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and strategic Tiger locations. Airforce bombers attacked LTTE headquarters at Kondavil in Jaffna on 8 March, believing a high-level meeting to be in progress. Three LTTE were killed and five wounded. A week later, air attacks badly damaged the LTTE's key *Kadalpura* naval base on the Valvettiturai coast. There is a new wave of intelligence from Jaffna say defence sources, provided by embittered exiles and LTTE radio intercepts by Tamil group EPDP on the Army-controlled islands west of the peninsula.

Conditions for the one million war-weary trapped inside Jaffna remain marginal, shored up by 8,000 tons of food aid arriving monthly by ICRC ship. Medical supplies remain critical and there are growing civilian deaths from lack of painkilling drugs or antibiotics. Offshore shelling by the Sri Lankan navy on Columbuthurai, Ariyalai and Po-

likandy in mid-March generated a fresh wave of casualties and damage.

The weak link in the Army blockade remains Elephant Pass and points east where Chun-

dikulam offers jungle cover. Another 17 Sri Lankan soldiers died in a LTTE counter attack at Vetrilaikerni on 5 March. The western crossing point to the peninsula is also fiercely contested and a LTTE dawn raid on Poonagari killed 18 Sri Lankan soldiers in late March, Tiger sources claim. Between the Army's Forward Defence Line in Vavuniya and the edge of Jaffna lagoon, there are hundreds of miles of hostile terrain. The Army knows that it can take territory but not hold it unless it advances a few miles at a time. Military leaders are contemplating not a quick smash and grab foray into Jaffna but a long, slow war of attrition while Tiger elite troops remain bottled up in the peninsula.

The peace process, similarly embattled, lurched abruptly sideways when a parliamentary Select Committee set up last August to solve the ethnic question, adjourned until 21 April to consider over 200 submissions. The key proposals come from Tourism Minister S.Thondaman, whose blueprint for devolution generated a new wave of Sinhalese chauvinism when made public in December. The Tigers say they are willing to use Mr Thondaman's proposals "as a basis for negotiations" and have invited a Select Committee delegation to visit Jaffna or offer a LTTE negotiating team to visit Colombo.

Mr Thondaman angrily broke a two-month silence following the Select Committee adjournment in a combative interview in Colombo's *Sunday Times* in late March. Asked whether the LTTE should be defeated or weakened before holding talks, Mr Thondaman said wiping out the LTTE would mean wiping out the Tamils and their aspirations - remarks which engendered a parallel backlash from Colombo Tamil politicians.

It is now a war of attrition on both fronts. Will Mr Premadasa, through the lightning rod of Mr Thondaman, wear down Sinhala opposition to a negotiated settlement in the north? Or will the Army wear down the Tigers in the Vanni where their hidden strength lies?

■ Rev Marcus Fernando, Bishop of Chilaw and a Catholic delegation arrived in Jaffna in late March to discuss new peace moves with LTTE leaders, sources in Colombo say. The mission is said to have the blessing of the Select Committee and the government. Seven senior Buddhist clerics led by Maha Nayaka Ven. Balapitiye Siddhartha also plan to hold talks with the LTTE in Jaffna after the Tamil/Sinhalese New Year in early April.

## REPATRIATION

## Stranded

OVER 12,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees have returned from south India as part of an Indo-Sri Lankan government repatriation programme but many cannot return home because of the war and some have no homes left to go to, refugee workers say.

India says over 30,000 of 110,000 Sri Lankan refugees in government-run camps in Tamil Nadu have agreed to repatriate and have issued a directive to another 120,000 refugees living outside the camps to register for return to Sri Lanka by 28 March. Refugee NGOs believe conditions are unsafe for return while the war continues and say many were coerced or swayed by rehabilitation incentives into signing the return form.

Over 1,000 Sri Lankan refugees a week are arriving through the ports of Talaimannar on Mannar Island and Trincomalee in the east, but because of the fighting over 3,000 are stranded in makeshift refugee camps, admits the government. For 200 new arrivals, home has become the courtyard of Nilaveli Baptist church north of Trincomalee, which they share with 70 Kuchchaveli fishing families.

Trouble is everywhere. The Kuchchaveli folk who have lost homes and boats in the war, resent the newcomers who have jumped the queue for rehabilitation payments they are also entitled to. The Army is trigger-happy but refuses to allow the returnees to go back to their homes in Tiger-controlled areas of the district. Soldiers shot dead seven civilians in a van in the area a few weeks earlier.

Trincomalee remains an armed camp. As in other government-controlled areas

there is no rush to resettle Tamil refugees. NGO *Sarvodaya* is building hundreds of new houses for resettled Sinhalese on the Thambalakamam road and the Army launched a major cordon-and-search operation in Muthur in late March to clear the way for returning Muslim refugees.

Few returnees have been given more than 25% of the Rs2,000 (\$50) start-up payment promised to get them on their feet and fewer still will see anything of the Rs5,000 pledged to rebuild their homes. There are stories of returnees in Batticaloa denied the three months dry rations promised, of 25 returnee families marooned in the waiting room at Vavuniya railway station and other returnees too afraid to go north, wandering the streets of Matale.

Those returning to Mannar are no better off and many are unwilling or unable to leave the eight transit centres on the island. International refugee agency UNHCR's Open Relief Centre at Pesalai was searched by Sri Lankan soldiers in early March and one returnee detained as a LTTE suspect.

UNHCR who houses 30,000 of Sri Lanka's 650,000 officially displaced at Madhu on the mainland has closed the camp to new arrivals after a fresh influx in early March fleeing an Army offensive. UNHCR has consistently refused to endorse the repatriation saying conditions are not conducive to safe return. After a high-level UNHCR team from Geneva visited Mannar and Trincomalee in mid-March, it is unlikely to change its mind.

## Freed

Twelve Muslim businessmen held by the LTTE in Jaffna for over 18 months were released in early March. ACM Saly of the Muslim Refugee Rehabilitation Organisation said no ransom was paid.

## Detained

Sinhalese left-wing weekly *Ravaya* says 124 Tamils are in police custody after a security crackdown on LTTE infiltration of the Hill Country last month. Of 45 LTTE suspects arrested in Uva, five have been released.

## Denied

After New Delhi expressed concern over a spate of attacks on Indian fishermen, Sri Lankan Navy Commander Vice Admiral Fernando denied using excessive force to police the Palk Strait at a press conference on 26 March.

## Obstructed

Dr Manorani Saravanamuttu, mother of murdered journalist Richard de Zoysa was awarded Rs 10,000 costs by Colombo's Supreme Court after she was denied access to police documents in a Rs 1 million defamation suit brought by a senior police officer she identified as one of her son's abductors.

## Unrestrained

The final report of the Kokkaddicholai Commission of Enquiry into the massacre of 67 civilians in Batticaloa by the Army, released in late March said the deaths were the result of "unrestrained behaviour" by unidentifiable soldiers and called for a military inquiry. Five million rupees in compensation payments will be made to the bereaved.

## *New LTTE hit-squad in south India*

AFTER the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, India is determined to root out LTTE activity in the south and 220,000 Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu are a convenient scapegoat. Calling for a ban on the LTTE, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha told the state assembly on 19 March that a new Tiger suicide squad had been dispatched from Jaffna to kill her, to blow up the Gandhi investigation team and to free LTTE suspects in the assassination case from Chingleput jail. Four Sri Lankans found loitering near the prison

were given five-month sentences a few days later.

Since she came to power last June, Ms Jayalalitha has tightened coastal security in the Palk Strait to cut the Tigers off from their vital supply base. There is growing cooperation with Sri Lanka, who handed over two members of the Tamil Nadu Retrieval Force, a south Indian separatist group trained by the Tigers, who were captured on Delft last month.

Pan Tamil nationalism among south

India's 60 million Tamils has limited but active support. Mr P Nedumaran, leader of the Tamil National Movement and 173 others were arrested in early March to forestall a pro-LTTE meeting in Madras. Colombo insider columnist *Taraki* says the LTTE has already cemented links with remnants of the left-wing revolutionary *Naxalbari* movement active in south India in the 70s. More serious may be the Tigers' continuing links with organised crime which gives them political and economic muscle.

*Tamil-Muslim tensions explode in the east***Time bomb**

A NEW RASH of communal killings has paralysed Batticaloa and relief workers say tension is rising between the Tamil and Muslim communities. Four Tamils were killed and 14 wounded when a grenade was thrown into a minibus 50 metres from a Home Guard checkpoint outside the Muslim stronghold of Kattankudy on 18 March. Two Tamil women were also abducted in a van says Tamil group EPRLF, who demanded the government disarm Muslim Home Guards immediately. The attack was said to be in reprisal for the recent kidnapping of two Muslim businessmen, a major source of LTTE fundraising. A day later, a bomb exploded in the Annakal hotel in Batticaloa killing one Muslim and a Sinhalese and injuring 11 other people. Tamil MP Pararajasingham Joseph appealed for calm as

Batticaloa's police chief convened a meeting of community leaders. Major cordon-and-search operations began immediately as a new wave of security brought the town to a standstill.

In the rural areas there are no intermediaries. In Eravur, where some Tamil and Muslim refugees have returned after communal killings in August 1990, local people say Muslim Home Guards are out of control. Four Tamil fishermen were hacked to death in early March and in a search of Eravur Tamil school, Muslim Home Guards shot dead 11 year-old Kanapathipillai and injured a teacher.

Amnesty International says 14 young Tamil farmers from Kiran were arrested while harvesting last month and have disappeared. The local Army com-

mander banned the farmers from bringing in the rice crop in case it fell into LTTE hands. Relief workers say over 50 people have disappeared in the wake of Army operations in Batticaloa in February. Another 18 Sri Lankan soldiers were killed on 25 March on the Chenkalady-Badulla road when they walked into a LTTE ambush at Koduwamadu. Further north, the Tigers continue to target the Polannaruwa road and five soldiers, two Home Guards and 12 LTTE were killed in a clash near Sinhapura on 21 March. Defence sources say Vaharai LTTE leader *Dickson* was shot dead by the Tigers in early March for misappropriating funds.

Further south in Amparai, six police commandos of the *Special Task Force* (STF) were seriously injured when a bicycle bomb exploded in Kalmunai in early March. A series of police roundups and bomb scares continued in Kalmunai and Akkaraipatru throughout the month. Over 500 people in the surrounding villages were taken for questioning in a four hour operation on 20 March. All but three were later released. Tamil group TELO says it will provide security after Muslim threats to Tamil refugees from India being resettled in Veeramunai and Sorikalmunai. But the jigsaw of Tamil-Muslim villages south of Batticaloa threatens a thousand wars.

*The ghost of Trincomalee*

TRINCOMALEE the showpiece of "normalisation" in the north-east is eerily quiet, a series of ethnic ghettos ravaged by the June 1990 war and ringed by police and Army checkpoints. Local civil servants describe it as a "ghost town" and fear to cross the invisible battle lines that divide Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim quarters. In the rural areas, vast tracts of rice lands lie derelict. Less than half the hospitals and clinics function and fewer than 20% of the schools. Key local government services, food cooperatives and marketing boards are closed or hopelessly understaffed. Over 30,000 local people are in refugee camps, 5,000 Tamils in the Clapenberg aircraft hangers, a chain of Muslim camps around Muthur and Kinniya and a cluster of Sinhalese settlements close to Army camps. Another 73,000 in the district are displaced with friends and family. In Pankulam, Tamil houses have been bulldozed and local rice lands taken over by Muslims and Sinhalese.

The killings and disappearances continue. On 14 January nine Tamils disappeared in an Army night raid on Clapenberg. Five Tamils were shot in Irrakandy and another four in villages in Eechilampathai during Army operations in mid-February. In Uppuveli, a Navy unit abducted a 19 year-old girl following a roundup on 13 February. Houses and meagre food stocks are routinely burned in areas where the Army encounters Tiger activity. Areas further north around Kuchchaveli and Thiriyai are a virtual battle zone. Sri Lankan forces captured a deserted LTTE base south-west of Kuchchaveli in early March and in a Tiger attack at Kandakadu four LTTE died including divisional leader *Bahu*.

**Drought grips the south**

SOUTHERN Sri Lanka is in the grip of a major drought that will claim 75% of the forthcoming *Yala* rice crop and the Social Welfare ministry has pledged Rs 600 million (\$15 million) to provide drinking water and dry rations for over two million people.

The tea industry has been badly hit and 110 factories in the south have closed down because they cannot pay 500,000 workers their New Year April advance. Tea production is expected to fall by 30 million kgs this year affecting valuable foreign exchange earnings. There are fears of retrenchment in the planned privatisation of the estate sector. Speaking to plantation workers in Baddegama on 9 March President Premadasa pledged that not one job would be lost in the process. Over Rs 400 million a month

was pumped into the plantations every month in wage bills said Mr Premadasa and the estate sector had to be made viable. As the drought tightens its grip, economists predict a new round of price rises in staple foods and further inflation.

There is also growing concern on the south over the morale of the Army after a military spokesman revealed in late March that in the past four years over 3,000 soldiers had deserted. Many of them, say the Colombo press are from frontline infantry in the north-east. There has been a dramatic rise in murders, rapes and robberies which is conveniently attributed to the deserters. Army commander Lt Gen Cecil Waidyaratne in a circular has called for a new "determination and discipline" at the battle front.

## THE OPPOSITION'S LONG MARCH IN THE POLITICAL WILDERNESS

*Quarrelsome pilgrims*

THOUSANDS of people set out from Colombo on 16 March on a 179-mile *Pada Yatra* or traditional pilgrimage to Kataragama, Sri Lanka's major religious shrine in the south sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists, to protest against the government and its policies.

The 16-day march organised by Sri Lanka's opposition parties seeks to highlight the mishandling of the north-east war, growing poverty and continuing disappearances and abductions by security forces said Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) national organiser Anura Bandaranaike. The protest, punctuated by a series of political rallies in the south, is the brainchild of human rights activist and SLFP MP Mahinda Rajapakse. But by the time the pilgrims reached Matara on 24 March the depth of SLFP disunity was apparent as Mr Rajapakse clashed publicly with pretender to the SLFP throne, Mrs Chandrika Kumaranatunge who seeks to prevent her brother Anura Bandaranaike replacing their mother as leader of the party. Observers say the succession struggle will be bloody. Anura

Bandaranaike has slapped a Rs10 million libel suit on his sister's main backer SLFP Central Committee member SB Disanayake. Current opposition unity as portrayed on "the Long March" is simple opportunism. Most parties, including the SLFP only rushed to join the *Pada Yatra* late in the day when they were certain it would attract popular support. The march which arrives in Kataragama on 1 April was described by the pro-government *Sunday Observer* as "an April Fools Rally" and President Premadasa said the marchers were desecrating religion while others shed crocodile tears over murderers - a reference to the opposition's championing of human rights and their supposed sympathy with the abortive three year insurrection by the Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) which cost over 40,000 lives.

Over 7,000 of the 15,000 detained in the south in the aftermath of the JVP revolt have been rehabilitated and released said Mr Premadasa in Anuradhapura on 18 March. Human rights groups say some have subsequently vanished and there is

still concern over abductions by security forces despite a new government Human Rights Task Force and a Presidential Commission on Disappearances.

Some 17 students and Buddhist monks arrested in Wadduwa in early March as JVP suspects, were only released after a two-week protest campaign by opposition MPs and teachers. Speaking in Colombo on 5 March, SLFP MP Mahinda Wijesekara told hundred of weeping mothers at a meeting of OPFMD - an organisation working for the families of the disappeared - that 6,000 youths were missing in Matara District and that those responsible should be identified and punished.

One of those said to be responsible is senior police chief Premadasa Udugampola, alleged to have supervised thousands of death squad killings in Kandy and the south at the height of the JVP insurrection. Mr Udugampola is now on the run after a court order to re-open inquiries into the death of human rights lawyer Wijedasa Liyanarachchi in a Colombo police cell in September 1988.

**25,000 Sri Lankan Tamils claim asylum in Europe**

REPORTS submitted to the European Consultation on Refugees and Exiles in Madrid in early April say almost 25,000 Sri Lankan Tamils claimed asylum in European countries in 1991.

Switzerland has now become the prime destination with 7,349 arrivals last year, many from other European countries say immigration officials attracted by the thriving black economy in the tourist and hotel trade. More than 5,000 arrived in Germany and almost 4,000 in Britain.

Fewer than 5% of Sri Lankan applicants gain refugee status in European countries. Most are given temporary status or are refused outright but are allowed to remain in the country while lengthy legal appeals continue. The honourable exception remains France where 68% of 3,398 Tamil asylum seekers were given refugee status in 1991.

But there is a new wave of right-wing racism in European countries. ECRE reports over 2,000 racist attacks in Germany last year, a ten-fold increase, many often directed at refugees. Tamil asylum

seeker Sekharam Ratnakesan had his right leg sliced off by the Saarbrücken to Mainz express after right-wing thugs drugged him and dumped him unconscious on a railway line in southern Germany last October. To escape the north-east war, most Sri Lankans fall prey to the

notorious Colombo "travel agencies" who specialise in spiriting asylum-seekers to Western destinations on forged papers for Rs 400,000 (\$10,000). In mid-March, Colombo police announced a new crackdown on refugee racketeers who many observers say are heavily taxed by the LTTE.

The expatriate refugee population has become a valuable resource for LTTE fundraising worldwide. Colombo papers claimed this month that Tamil refugees in Germany and other European countries pay a compulsory \$60 a month tax to the north-east war effort. The *Toronto Star* broke a story a few weeks ago linking Tamil refugees forging Canadian passports to a heroin-smuggling ring.

At the other end of the scale are the victims, asylum-seekers duped by the Colombo refugee mafia, abandoned in Bangkok or Nairobi hotel rooms or on the Yugoslav border. The Norwegian daily *Soendag Afterposten* reported this month on almost 100 Sri Lankan Tamils stranded in Albania after a LTTE "package tour" went wrong.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas.

If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact

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