

Despite president's denials, Sri Lankan military continues offensive war

By Sarath Kumara
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In a meeting on Monday with diplomats from the US, the European Union, Norway and Japan, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse denied that his government was waging war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Repeating earlier comments to the media, he claimed that the Sri Lankan military was only responding to LTTE attacks and had not launched any offensive operations.

The diplomats represent the co-chairs of the so-called Sri Lankan peace process, which has all but collapsed, along with the 2002 ceasefire agreement, amid open fighting over the last month. In a statement issued after the meeting, the president rather absurdly declared that the government remained committed to the truce and was awaiting the LTTE's response for the resumption of peace talks.

Rajapakse's comments are based on a series of lies. The president initiated the current fighting when he ordered an offensive by 2,000 troops on July 26 to capture the Mavilaru sluice gate inside LTTE territory. The government claimed that the operation was a limited humanitarian operation, but the head of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), Ulf Hendrickson, declared that it was an obvious breach of the 2002 ceasefire.

The military used the Mavilaru offensive as the pretext for bombing other key LTTE targets, provoking retaliatory attacks that have continued to escalate. From August 11, the LTTE launched attacks on army positions on the northern Jaffna peninsula. Heavy fighting was reported last Friday at Muhamalai and Nagarkovil along with LTTE artillery attacks on the key Palaly air base and military complex. The northern portion of the peninsula held by government forces is largely cut off by land and air.

The latest casualty lists released yesterday by the

military indicate the extent of the fighting. According to the press statement, armed forces casualties from August 1 to 21 have been 159 dead and 452 injured. The military claims to have killed around 600 LTTE fighters and wounded many more, but the figures are likely to be inflated. Defence spokesmen continue to insist, for instance, that scores of schoolgirls killed in a bombing attack last week were "child soldiers".

Significantly, none of the powers represented at Monday's meeting criticised Rajapakse. For three weeks, as the military launched its offensive at Mavilaru, the co-chairs maintained a complete silence, effectively giving the Sri Lankan government a green light to proceed. The co-chairs issued a call last week for an end to the conflict and a resumption of peace talks, but, like meeting with the president, it appears to have been little more than a formality.

In a statement issued after the meeting, Rajapakse declared that his government would consider an end to the fighting if LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran made an explicit commitment to a "comprehensive and verifiable cessation of hostilities". The president immediately added the condition that "such a cessation of hostilities should include explicit modalities of ensuring that the Sampur area does not pose a military threat to the Trincomalee harbour and its environs".

The caveat amounts to a demand that the 2002 ceasefire, which he claims to uphold, be rewritten to strengthen the position of the Sri Lankan military. Since being narrowly elected as president last November, Rajapakse, with the backing of his Sinhala chauvinist allies, has provocatively been pressing for a renegotiation of the truce. In the current fighting, the LTTE has used its Sampur bases to threaten the port of Trincomalee—a key strategic facility and lifeline to government troops in Jaffna.

Army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka expressed the government's real attitude in comments to the right-wing *Island* newspaper. Fonseka, who was nearly killed in an LTTE suicide bombing in April, declared: "It's only a matter of time before the LTTE is defeated." Declaring that "the army has nothing against Tamils," he justified the killing of schoolgirls at Puthukudiyirippu last week by saying they were "child soldiers". SLMM and UNICEF officials who visited the site have refuted the claim.

Amid the open clashes with the LTTE, the military and its paramilitary allies are continuing a covert war of intimidation and terror against anyone deemed to be an LTTE supporter. Since last November, Rajapakse has presided over a series of provocative murders and escalating violence aimed at weakening the LTTE and undermining the 2002 ceasefire.

On August 18, a group of armed thugs attacked a warehouse connected to the pro-LTTE newspaper *Uthayan* near Jaffna town. They tied up, blindfolded and threatened to kill the guard, before setting fire to the building. The government-controlled areas of the Jaffna peninsula have been under stringent security and extensive curfews for nearly two weeks, pointing to the involvement of the military in the attack. Four *Uthayan* employees have been murdered this year.

On the morning of August 19, hundreds of soldiers stormed onto the Jaffna university campus and arrested International Tamil Student Federation leader T. Paherathan. They also broke into the student federation office and seized computers and documents belonging to the union. The operation, the first of its kind, continued until the early evening as troops broke down doors and searched premises.

On the night of August 20, unidentified gunmen shot and killed Sinnathamby Sivamaharajah, 68, a former Tamil MP and managing director of the pro-LTTE *Namathu Eelanadu*. Sivamaharajah has organised campaigns against the military's continued occupation of extensive high security zones that resulted in the expulsion of thousands of residents from their homes and businesses. He was murdered outside his home on the Jaffna peninsula near one of the zones.

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