

Military administration imposed in eastern Sri Lanka

By Nanda Wickremasinghe
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The Sri Lankan military has quickly demonstrated its intentions regarding the capture of the island's eastern province from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Far from "liberating" the people of the East, the security forces are establishing a military occupation over the entire area in preparation for stamping out any opposition to the government and its continuing communal war.

Following the army's conquest of the LTTE's last major eastern stronghold, President Mahinda Rajapakse ordered a victory celebration on July 19 at which he declared that a "new dawn" was opening up for the East of the country. The ceremony, which evoked little popular enthusiasm, was an unabashed glorification of the renewed civil war that has already resulted in thousands of deaths and turned 200,000 into refugees.

Just days later, Major General Parakrama Pannipitiya, the military commander of the eastern province, issued a circular under the rather deceptive title of "directives for rural development work". In reality, the document is a blueprint for the imposition of a military-dominated administration through the province, right down to the village level.

The circular declared: "Rural development of areas liberated by the forces after the humanitarian operations where there is a civil population must be done under the supervision of the police stationed in the area, as well as the armed forces". (These "humanitarian operations" were in fact offensive operations in flagrant breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement between the two sides.)

Village-level committees are to be chosen, not by a free vote, but by the police and army. "It will be mandatory," the circular explained, "to include in these committees a member of the armed forces/STF [police paramilitary units], a police officer, and Grama

Niladhari [village official] serving in the respective village".

The president of the villages committee is to be either a member of the police or the military. Meetings to discuss "rural development" are to be held fortnightly, but the committees will have no independent budget or means for implementing projects. All proposals will have to be submitted to higher levels—divisional or provincial secretaries. Reports of the meetings will be sent to the headquarters of the eastern military commander.

If the real purpose of the committees were to develop backward rural areas in the East of the island, the involvement of the security forces would be unnecessary. The Rajapakse government, however, has no more intention than its predecessors to end the decades of neglect that have produced widespread poverty and lack of basic services. Far from addressing the needs of villagers, these committees are instruments of the security forces for spying, intimidation and repression.

In the North and East, the security forces work in close collaboration with Tamil paramilitaries such as the Karuna group in suppressing dissent. Hundreds of people have been "disappeared" or murdered over the past year—in all likelihood by death squads operated either directly or indirectly by the military. It would not be at all surprising if members of these paramilitaries were appointed to the newly established village committees.

The military has also placed severe restrictions on the activities of various non government organisations (NGOs)—local and international—one of the few sources of assistance in many areas. According to the circular, village committees may identify projects but NGOs will require approval from the district secretarial

offices before any involvement.

“Please note that in future NGOs should not be permitted to do as they please in these areas as before. In order to fulfill this work effectively, the relevant District Secretary, the Provincial Secretary and the Commanding Officers of different Army units in these areas, STF and SPs [police superintendents] have to be well coordinated,” the circular stated.

The military and its Sinhala chauvinist supporters have been bitterly critical of NGOs, denouncing them as supporters of “LTTE terrorism” for exposing some of the army’s worst atrocities. Last August the military was implicated in the cold-blooded murder of 17 aid workers from the French-based Action Contre la Faim (ACF). The bodies were found lined up outside the ACF office, shot in the back of the head after the army reentered the town of Muttur.

Jeevan Thyagarajah, executive director of the Human Rights Consortium, an umbrella organisation of the NGOs, questioned the intervention by the military in development work. “Is there going to be a civil administration in the east or a military administration? People are already suspicious about government plans,” Thyagarajah told the BBC on July 22.

The military has bypassed normal civilian channels. The *Sunday Times* noted in its “Situation Report” on July 29 that the circular has been sent directly to the police heads in the eastern districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara, the commandant of the STF in the province, army brigade commanders and district secretaries. The *Daily Mirror* reported that the eastern military commander called a meeting of NGOs and government officers in late July to explain its new directives.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse told the *Island* on July 14 that “the task of the armed forces [was] to keep the areas and strategic strongholds ... which were captured from the LTTE terrorists, safe from infiltration”. Some 50 new police stations and posts are to be set up throughout the East. In May, the government established a new high security zone in the Sampur and Muttur area to coincide with a new Special Economic Zone.

The establishment of a military administration in the East is a sharp warning to working people throughout the island. Determined to prosecute its unpopular war and to put the economic burden on the masses, the

Rajapakse government is increasingly reliant on the military and anti-democratic measures. It will not hesitate in placing other areas of the country under military rule in order to shore up its shaky rule.

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