

Sri Lankan army suffers a debacle as a northern offensive collapses

By Sarath Kumara
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The Sri Lankan army suffered a serious defeat last week when a military offensive near Muhamalai and Kilali was repulsed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There is no reliable figure for the number of casualties, but at least 140 soldiers were killed and over 300 wounded. The number is almost certain to rise as news of the operation filters out through heavy government censorship.

President Mahinda Rajapakse plunged the island back to war in July 2006 and earlier this year formally tore up the 2002 ceasefire with the LTTE. His shaky coalition government and the defence establishment have promised a speedy and easy victory over the LTTE by the end of the year. As a result, any military reversal has the potential to provoke a serious political crisis for the government.

Behind closed doors, there are clearly concerns in ruling circles. Shamindra Ferdinando, a reporter with close connections to the security establishment, wrote in the *Island* on Friday, that the LTTE had “jolted the government with devastating counterattacks on the Jaffna front. Although it wouldn’t have altered the overall course of the military campaign, the re-building of the depleted infantry units would be a tough task.”

Publicly, the government and military top brass have frantically tried to suppress details of the defeat, including the extent of casualties. Police and soldiers have been stationed in hospitals and outside funeral parlours to prevent the media from speaking to injured soldiers and relatives. When contacted by the WWSW, Dr. Anil Jasinghe, director of accident services at Colombo National Hospital, said that he had been ordered “from the top” to provide no details and to block any visit by journalists.

Official accounts of what happened in northern Sri Lanka on April 23 have been marked by evasion, obfuscation and lies. Government and military spokesmen have denied that what took place was a failed offensive, or an ambush, and continue to insist that the army captured LTTE frontlines, following an LTTE attack. Injured soldiers, who spoke to the WWSW, however, were quite certain that they had been ordered to advance and walked into a trap.

Fighting erupted in the early morning of Wednesday at 2.30 a.m. and lasted until 12:40 p.m. along a narrow neck of land, some 7 kilometres wide, which connects the northern Jaffna peninsula with the rest of the island. The purpose of the offensive was obviously to capture LTTE positions further south, including the strategic Elephant Pass, which the army lost in 2000. LTTE strongholds in the Wannu region, including its base at Kilinochchi would then be vulnerable to attack.

The “Situation Report” in last weekend’s *Sunday Times* painted a bleak picture of the frontlines. “Any soldier knows Muhamalai is unfriendly terrain. When there is bright sunshine, the plates of rice

and curry they hold in their hand are showered by the winds with dusty thin sand. Other times when it rains, the ground is soggy and the menace from the mosquitoes is threatened.”

The newspaper’s Iqbal Athas was one of a handful of journalists selected to tour the northern war zone earlier this month. He was in no doubt that the military was preparing a major offensive, pointing out that “some senior army officers in the north had hinted so”. The timing of the operation coincided with the campaign for provincial elections in the East which are due to take place on May 10. The government was clearly calculating that a military victory would boost its chances.

The *Daily Mirror* reported on Thursday that the attack took place less than six hours after a visit by army commander, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, to the Jaffna peninsula where he met with senior military officers about future war plans. Fonseka boasted earlier this year that he would end the “terrorist” problem before he retired this December.

Defence spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara initially insisted that the operation had been defensive, not offensive. The armed forces had “repulsed the LTTE attack”, he declared. He claimed that military losses had been small and that the army had captured the LTTE’s heavily-guarded first line of defence, killed 52 of its fighters and injuring more than 100. Later, without explanation, he increased the number of LTTE dead to 100 and announced an advance of 500 metres.

The story quickly fell apart, however. By noon last Thursday, the military was forced to admit that 43 soldiers had been killed and 160 injured. Another 33 were reported as missing. The alteration of the figures came after the LTTE handed the bodies of 28 soldiers to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). An obvious question arises: if the army was advancing, how was it that the LTTE was collecting bodies from the field of battle? The military has provided no explanation.

Further reports on Thursday indicated that army casualties were far higher. The *Island* newspaper, which fully backs the war, estimated the number of dead at 140 and injured at 200. *Lanka-e-News* reported that 143 bodies had been handed to just three funeral parlours, in and around Colombo alone—not counting the bodies given by the LTTE to the ICRC. The website also reported that 368 military personnel had been injured, 286 of them seriously.

The pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* website has published pictures of a large quantity of captured arms and ammunition and acknowledged that 25 of LTTE fighters had died in the battle. Both sides in the conflict are notorious for inflating their “successes” and minimising their losses. The government has banned any independent reporting from the

frontlines.

The evasive character of the official response is clear from the following exchange between government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella and journalists at a press conference last Thursday.

Q: Some of the reports say this was a military disaster?

KR: Certainly not. Certainly not. Disasters have happened when 1,500 people were killed in Elephant Pass.

Q: Is it a setback?

KR: We have moved forward so it is not a setback. If you move backwards you can call it a setback.

Q: Is it that when the troops moved forward the LTTE registered their artillery and mortar positions to fire at the soldiers. This was an ambush essentially. It sounds like the troops fell into the trap of the LTTE.

KR: One could interpret it that way. When you engage in a battle of this nature, a 30-year-old battle, we have debacles. In between we have fierce battles, and that is part of the routine. As far as the army is concerned they are confident that they have moved forward. They have established themselves. That is the target. They have gone forward 500 metres.

Rambukwella's comments reek of cynical indifference for the lives of soldiers, not to speak of many thousands of civilians who have been killed, maimed or displaced by the past two years of fighting.

Last week's "debacle" was the worst single loss for the Sri Lankan military since October 2006, when around 400 soldiers perished in the same area in a failed offensive. In November, another military adventure in the Muhamalai area ended up in a similar defeat, costing the lives of scores of soldiers.

The decision to squander the lives of scores, if not hundreds, of troops into a new attempt to capture the LTTE's northern strongholds is a measure of the government's desperation. Beginning in July 2006, the Sri Lankan security forces were able to drive the LTTE out of its eastern bases with relative ease, assisted by a major split in the LTTE's ranks in 2004.

Last July, after whipping up patriotic fervour over "the victory in the East", the government and the army turned their attention to the North. Intense fighting began in the north western district of Mannar. Another front was opened up in the north eastern area of Welioya in January. Fighting has bogged down, however, as the LTTE, with its back to the wall, resisted every advance.

The offensive at Muhamalai was a hurried attempt to open up a third front that would threaten key LTTE strong points. The government response to last week's failure was to unleash a savage aerial bombardment on LTTE held areas. On Wednesday evening, air force warplanes and helicopters hit what were claimed to be LTTE positions in Muhamalai. The following day, an LTTE base, allegedly for the training of suicide bombers, was attacked at Panikkankulam.

Desperate to announce a "success", government troops in the Mannar district on Friday seized the Catholic church at Madhu, after weeks of bitter fighting in the area.

Two days after the collapse of the Muhamalai offensive, a time bomb went off in Piliyandala, on the outskirts of Colombo, killing 26 civilians—men, women and children. The LTTE, which is based on the reactionary communal outlook of Tamil separatism, has carried out such atrocities before and may have been responsible for this bombing. But in the present situation, it is also possible that the military or its allied militia set off the bomb to enable the government and its chauvinist supporters to whip up a pro-war frenzy.

There are growing signs of opposition to the war. Many people voted for Rajapakse in November 2005, because they expected him to end the war, not restart it. The Muhamalai disaster will only fuel further anger as working people are compelled to bear the burdens not only of the ongoing death and destruction, but the economic impact of the war. Skyrocketing military expenditures are adding the soaring inflation caused by rising global food and energy prices.

Comments in the *Daily Mirror* last week gave a glimpse of the underlying hostility to the war and the communal politics of all political parties.

One reader wrote: "Brothers/Sisters, this war can not be won and for those who support this war, please go ahead and see the photos of our brave soldiers lying dead in the bunkers. Did they deserve to die like that? What will we gain by sacrificing our soldier's life? A massive grave yard (mother lanka)." Another wrote: "It is sad to listen to this story. Our boys from both communities are dying for their masters' blood thirst."

A third commented: "Oh my god, are we speaking of human lives. Are they not sons, brothers and fathers of some Sri Lankan. Should this happen in this Dharmadvipaya [holy land]? Who benefits from this war? This is what happens when a war is fought on a political agenda. Just imagine the plight of these families who have lost a beloved. Enough is enough. SRI LANKANS need not be fundamentalists, chauvinists or fanatics like others."

The reference by government spokesman Rambukwella to the Elephant Pass disaster during his press conference was not an accidental one. The government is acutely aware of the political crisis sparked in 2000 after the military barely staved off a complete collapse of its northern armies. The LTTE not only overran the military's base but threatened tens of thousands of troops trapped on the northern Jaffna peninsula.

Having restarted the war, Rajapakse's militarist clique in Colombo has already resorted to emergency rule, arbitrary detention and state terror to suppress criticism and opposition. Hundreds of people have been "disappeared" or murdered by military-sponsored death squads. The attempts to stamp out any reporting of the Muhamalai defeat are a warning sign that even more draconian methods are being prepared for the future.

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