



CLAWS

Sri Lanka: Where is the Conflict Heading?

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Gathering Storm

In July 2007, with the capture of Toppigala, the last stronghold of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the east, the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) announced “liberation of the east” from the Tigers. The security forces took nearly a year to complete the eastern operations, but with immense support from cadres of the breakaway LTTE faction under Karuna. Karuna’s men knew the terrain well, but also provided timely and useful intelligence to the government forces. They also, to a greater extent, stifled local support to the Tigers that was vital for any militant group to succeed. The major setback for the LTTE, however, was in the loss of the east as a main recruiting ground. All these factors contributed to the LTTE’s eviction from the eastern parts of the island. Yet, one cannot confidently claim that the east is fully free of Tiger presence. The Tigers have resorted to guerrilla tactics by randomly killing Karuna’s men and security forces personnel. This trend is expected to continue for some time. From the LTTE’s point of view, it was only a “strategic retreat” to “entrap” government forces.

The Lions March On...

However, with the momentum gained in the east, the government launched a four-pronged attack on the

LTTE-controlled areas comprising the full districts of Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi and parts of Mannar and Jaffna. Task Force 1 and 58 Division were entrusted with the Mannar front; Task Force 2 and 57 Division took care of the advance from Vavuniya; the newly raised 59 Division was put in charge of Weli Oya area; 53 and 55 Divisions guarded forward defence lines (FDLs) along Muhamaalai in the northern front. The plan was to gradually encircle Kilinochchi, the LTTE’s administrative capital, from all sides.

Of all, the northern front has been static. Various attempts by the military in breaching FDLs in this front have not been successful. This is mainly due to the LTTE’s seriousness in retaining the hard-won Elephant Pass. The Pass is strategically so important that the famous adage in the island is “those who rule the Elephant Pass rule the north.” The LTTE is also unyielding in this front with an aim to capture Jaffna, which it lost to the security forces in 1995. Intelligence reports suggest that the LTTE plans to launch a series of amphibious operations to clear the peninsula of government forces. This may not be good news for New Delhi as the Tigers would be a few miles closer to the Indian shores in that case. What could India do to keep the Tigers as much away as possible?

contd. to pg 2.

No. 6, October 2008



Sri Lanka: Where is the....

The advance of government forces at the Mannar front, however, has been relatively rapid. As of August 2008, the military has controlled Vellankulam, the last major stronghold of the Tigers in the northwestern coast before Pooneryn. After capturing Kalekuda jetty on the Kilinochchi coast on 11 August, the troops were knocking at Thunnukai and Mallavi areas. On 23 August, the army announced capturing of strategic Thunkkai and Uyilankulam areas and was just 12 km from the Kilinochchi town. On 28 August, Palamoddai and the Ulathuvely beach area fell to the government forces. Earlier, capture of Viduthalaitivu, one of the key bases of the Sea Tigers, in July, was considered vital. The objective of 57 Division from Vavuniya front is to link-up with 58 Division through the Vellankulam-Maankulam road. If this is achieved, the supply lines of the LTTE would further deteriorate. Advance of 59 Division at Weli Oya front has also been progressing fairly. As on 25 August, this division took partial control of Thannimuruppukulam tank bund, the main source of water in the area. On 2 September, the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) announced capture of Mallavi, an important rebel town. According to GOSL, its forces were just few kilometres away from Kilinochchi town as on 7 October 2008.

The Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) and Navy (SLN) have been ably supporting the army in the advancement. Air strikes are being used to support the ground troops as well to destroy the LTTE defences and installations. Precision aerial bombing to kill LTTE leaders, based on specific intelligence, has also been the SLAF's

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additional task. One of the strategies, thus, is “not just go for terrains, but [to] go for the kill.” LTTE political wing chief S. P. Tamilchelvam was one of the prized victims of such strategy. The government wishes to have many such prized catches. The SLAF has also been mandated to neutralise the air power capability of the LTTE. Since the LTTE's first air attack on the Kattunayake air base in March 2007, the third dimension has been one of the major concerns of the Sri Lankan security forces. The military's air defence systems are not adequate enough to tackle the ‘Air Tigers’.

The navy has been used to mainly cut the supply lines of the LTTE and, at the same time, weaken the ‘Sea Tigers’ as much as possible to reduce amphibious operations. With the addition of the Rapid Action Boat Squadron that uses rigid hull inflatable boats, the SLN is now able to operate even in shallow waters. In addition, the GOSL has been fairly successful in obtaining support of important countries like India and the United States in stifling the LTTE's supplies – monetary and material – from outside. Reprimands to the LTTE from the international community came basically due to concerns on “terrorism proliferation” by the Tigers. If the present military strategy, complemented by international support, is sustained, the SLA feels that in a year's time, the Tigers would be reduced to nothing more than a “rag-tag terrorist outfit.” The present force ratio between the government forces and the LTTE is 20:1. Unlike the LTTE, the GOSL is in a position to further turn the ratio in its favour.

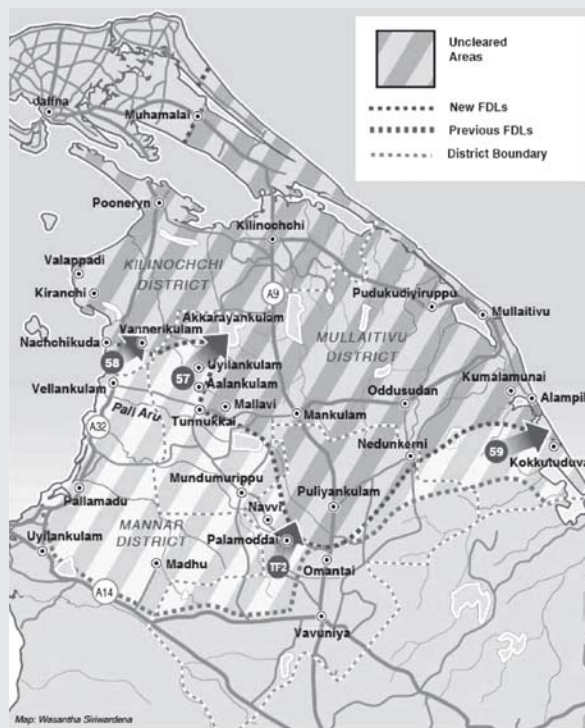
... but the Tigers Resist

Yet, it is doubtful whether the GOSL could “finish the LTTE” in a year's time. It is true that the LTTE's strength has dwindled comparatively. Their supply lines, especially, have been strained. There is shortage of manpower as well. At the same time, it is naïve to underestimate the Tigers. Setbacks have always been part and parcel of the LTTE's growth and they are

known for bouncing back with ferocity. The Tigers are presently consolidating their auxiliary force – *Makkal Padai* – consisting mainly of civilians. They have also called their ‘reserves’ back to duty.

The present strategy of the Tigers is to overstretch the army into unfamiliar terrain of Wanni by giving less resistance to the advancing forces from the south. The past suggests that the LTTE regained the lost territories by inflicting heavy damage to the government forces at an appropriate time. “Strategic retreat” of the LTTE has been partly to conserve its energy in terms of men and material. Displaying conventional capability at this juncture, therefore, is not prudent. The Tigers may appear as losing “the capability to fight as a conventional force”; but appearances are deceptive.

As envisaged by the army chief, even if the LTTE’s conventional capability is reduced, the group would be fighting a “different war”. The Tigers are already using hit and run tactics in the east and suicide attacks in the south. Despite heavy security measures, the LTTE is in a position to strike any part of the island any time. The LTTE’s air wing, which has been lying low for some time, launched an air attack on Trincomalee naval base on the night of 26 August and again on Security Forces HQ in Vavuniya on 9 September, some inflicting damage. However, more than damage, keeping alive an element of surprise is the main objective. The Tigers have indicated making more such deep strike surprise attacks on vital targets. Sporadic air attacks may not alter the military balance, but would affect the morale of the troops. At the minimum, therefore, a low intensity conflict would continue for some years. The dynamics of the conflict are not expected to change dramatically even if the LTTE chief, Prabhakaran, falls, by luck. The LTTE’s second-rung commanders are capable and moti-



vated to carry on the struggle.

Future of the Conflict

Nevertheless, the main challenge for the government, at this juncture, is to sustain the present military push amidst an economic downslide and amidst international criticism on the human rights front. The government has already committed \$1.5 billion for the war this financial year, not without draining resources meant for development. The inflation is hovering at about 30 per cent. Travel advisories from important countries like the United States, Australia,

Germany, Canada, Russia, Britain and New Zealand have constrained tourist flow. Tourism is one of Sri Lanka’s main sources of foreign exchange, along with garments, remittances and tea. The eastern parts of the island, one of the best tourist attractions, have not yet been made safe for the visitors. The garment industry is in peril due to the threat of suspension of lucrative trade concessions by the European Union (EU) if GOSL continues to ignore human rights concerns. Called “the GSP+ scheme”, the concessions helped Sri Lanka net a record \$2.9 billion from EU markets last year, or 37.5 per cent of the total export income. This scheme expires in December 2008.

The EU’s concerns are especially expressed on killings, displacement and disappearances. Nearly 10,000 people have been killed since 2005 when ‘proxy war’ commenced between the two antagonists that gradually slipped into ‘undeclared war’ and later into ‘declared war’. The casualty figures are expected to increase manifold as confrontations get to a stage of close-quarter fighting in the coming days. Over 20,000 people have fled to India as refugees, and about 500,000 are displaced internally, including 135,000 in the past two months. The numbers are expected to increase further as the forces advance. Sri Lanka ranks



Sri Lanka: Where is the...

second only to Iraq on the above two figures. Unexplained disappearances have become normal. Since the unilateral abrogation of the CFA by the GOSL in January 2008, nearly 150 persons have disappeared from the capital Colombo alone. The figures may be high in the Tamil-dominated northeast.

The government should keep these side-effects in mind during the operations. What is more important is not winning the war against the LTTE, but winning the hearts and minds of the minority Tamils. As long as grievances that gave rise to militant groups like the LTTE remain, the Tigers will continue to thrive. Popular support to the LTTE is not overwhelming. However, the Sri Lankan state's continued indifference and apathy towards the Tamils have pushed it towards the Tigers.

Unfortunately, the present regime under Rajapakse does not seem to understand this. The progress in drafting a political package for the Tamil minorities has been lethargic. The All Party Representative Committee (APRC), appointed to "fashion creative options that satisfy minimum expectations as well as provide a comprehensive approach to the resolution of the national question" has not moved anywhere near to the stated objective. Instead of exploring creative options, the APRC, in its interim report, advised the President to implement the 13th amendment to the Constitution, which outlined devolution to provinces after the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of 1987. Even after 20 years, the ideas are back to square one.

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However, the government is unwilling to implement even these old ideas. It is appreciable that President Rajapakse conducted elections, firstly, to local councils in Batticaloa district in March and then to the now demerged eastern province in May this year. The post-election governance in the east, however, is not promising. This is a golden opportunity for the government to demonstrate its earnestness over power sharing with minorities. The opportunity, however, seems to be missed and rather misused to show to the international community that "democracy has been restored in the former fascist areas."



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Views expressed in this Issue Brief are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.



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