

# Fighting continues to escalate in Sri Lanka

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While neither the Sri Lankan government nor the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has formally torn up the 2002 ceasefire agreement, an undeclared war is escalating in the North and East of the island.

Since the killing of 64 Sinhalese villagers near the northern town of Kebithigollewa early Thursday morning, there have been four days of open warfare. The Sri Lankan government immediately blamed the LTTE for the Kebithigollewa bombing and ordered reprisals by the armed forces. Two days of air strikes and artillery barrages followed on LTTE positions near Kilinochchi, Mulaithivu and Muttur.

On Saturday, a major naval clash took place off the northwest coast near Mannar, in which the military claimed to have sunk eight LTTE vessels and killed 25 to 30 LTTE fighters. Both sides accused the other of initiating the battle, which also resulted in the deaths of 11 sailors. The LTTE acknowledged the heavy fighting, but insisted that only two of its fighters had been killed.

At the village of Pesalai on the neighbouring coast, at least five Tamil civilians were killed. While the military has denied responsibility, local villagers have blamed army and naval personnel for the deaths. In a particularly brutal attack, a grenade was lobbed into a church, where hundreds of locals were seeking sanctuary, killing an elderly woman and injuring at least 40 others. Four local fishermen were shot dead on the beach.

Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella claimed that the LTTE was responsible. However, Bishop Rayappa Joseph, who visited the scene, said: "There was no fight at the land; no LTTE cadres were there." He also pointed out that the fishermen "were still holding their national identity cards in their hands when they were shot," indicating they had been asked to produce them by security forces.

Other eyewitnesses accused the military. "We were packed into the church and all we heard was guns firing outside," V.P. Cruz said. He and others told Associated Press said that government forces—a mixture of army and navy troopers—had tossed the grenade into the church. "To the government, we are all [rebels]," Cruz said. Another villager, Mariyadas Loggu, asked: "If this is what the people responsible for security do, where else can we go?"

On the same day, security forces in Colombo announced that they captured three LTTE frogmen and explosives and had foiled a plot to attack naval vessels or shipping in the capital's harbour.

On Sunday, the LTTE breakaway group led by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, announced that it had overrun an LTTE camp in the eastern district of Ampara and killed at least 50 to 60 LTTE fighters. While the military and the Karuna group deny any collaboration, the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire, has contradicted the claim.

The Karuna group has been in close contact with military intelligence since its formation in 2004 and has been engaged in a clandestine war for months against the LTTE in the eastern districts. What is significant about the clash on Sunday is that a spokesman openly bragged about the attack to the media—a further indication that open warfare has broken out. The LTTE denied losing any fighters in the incident, insisting that it had forced the attackers to flee.

In a separate incident yesterday, three policemen were killed near the northern town of Vavuniya when a claymore mine exploded under a police water truck in which they were travelling.

The eruption of violence follows the collapse of limited talks that were scheduled to take place in Oslo on June 8-9. The two delegations arrived in Norway but failed to even meet. No further negotiations are planned and in effect the so-called peace process has broken down. In the wake of the failed talks, the Norwegian government wrote to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse and LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran asking whether each still adhered to the ceasefire and wanted SLMM monitors to remain in the country.

Whoever carried out the Kebithigollewa atrocity, the Colombo government is politically responsible for plunging the island back toward war. Since winning the presidency last November, Rajapakse and his Sinhala chauvinist allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—have made series of demands on the LTTE, including for a major revision of the ceasefire, calculated to block any meaningful negotiations.

At the same time, various anti-LTTE paramilitaries, such as the Karuna group, have, in league with the military, engaged in a series of violent attacks aimed at provoking the LTTE to respond. The latest round of escalating violence can be traced to the assassination of prominent pro-LTTE politician V. Vigneswaran on April 7—a fact that was confirmed in a recent SLMM report. Since then more than 600 people, including military personnel, LTTE fighters and supporters, and civilians, have died in what have become almost daily attacks and counterattacks.

While it is possible that the LTTE carried out the Kebithigollewa killings, it is just as likely it was carried out by those who have seized on it to demand an all-out war against the LTTE—sections of the military, the JVP and JHU, and allied Tamil paramilitaries. The JVP has seized on the incident to demand that the government end its policy of limited retaliation and launch a major offensive against the LTTE.

Significantly when President Rajapakse flew to Kebithigollewa to meet victims last Thursday, senior JVP figures Lal Kantha and Ranaweera Pathirana were already on the spot. The *Sunday Times* reported that the president noticed a pile of tyres, which, according to a policeman, had been set alight by JVP supporters. Such a signal has been used in the past as a means for initiating anti-Tamil pogroms. When challenged by Rajapakse, the JVP leaders denied any involvement. The president let the matter pass and instead instructed the local police chief to take action against those spreading false rumours.

The exchange is symptomatic of the real political relations in Colombo. The Rajapakse minority government rests directly on the JVP and JHU for parliamentary support. While the president attempts to present himself on the international stage as a man of peace to secure the backing of the major powers, his allies are whipping up a pogromist atmosphere against Tamils and demanding

full-scale war. The civil war erupted in 1983 following a vicious anti-Tamil pogrom across the island that claimed hundreds of lives.

The indiscriminate killing of civilians at Kebithigollewa and Pesalai is the sharpest warning that the return to civil war will take on an even more ruthless and barbaric form. The Colombo government is preparing a Patriotic Act, providing for the compulsory drafting of youth into the armed forces and strengthening already draconian emergency powers, in particular strict media censorship. In the war zones of the North and East, the security forces already operate as an army of occupation, which regards the entire Tamil minority as the enemy and carries out systematic harassment and intimidation.

These anti-democratic measures are not simply aimed against Tamils, but the entire working class. The preparations for war take place amid a deepening economic crisis, and a rising tide of strikes and protests against deteriorating living standards, job losses and economic restructuring. Incapable of meeting the social needs and democratic aspirations of the masses, the government, with the backing of the entire Colombo political establishment, is stirring up communal hatreds to divide working people and plunging the country back to civil war.