

Hundreds dead as Sri Lankan army launches final assault

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The Sri Lankan military has launched an offensive to capture the remaining small patch of land held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the country's north. Aid agencies have warned of a humanitarian disaster as the fighting engulfs an estimated 100,000 civilians still trapped in the government-proclaimed "no-fire" zone.

The government has rejected appeals by the UN, major powers and international organisations for a halt to the fighting, and cynically described the offensive as the world's "biggest rescue operation" to free civilians. In fact, what is taking place is a war crime that has already cost the lives of hundreds of civilians over the past two days alone.

Government propaganda has shown long lines of civilians fleeing from LTTE-controlled territory after the army breached the LTTE's defensive earthen barriers. The army claims to have "freed" more than 62,000 civilians over the past two days and released video footage to Colombo television stations. President Mahinda Rajapakse said the exodus was "no less a massive vote for freedom than the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989".

It is impossible to confirm the figures as the government has barred all independent reportage and most aid agencies from the war zone. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) spokeswoman Sarasi Wijeratne told news agencies that her organisation's figures were far lower—11,000 crossed the front lines on Monday and 5,000 on Tuesday.

The government has every reason to exaggerate the extent of the civilian exodus to deflect international criticism of its actions and keep working people elsewhere on the island in the dark over its crimes. Rajapakse accuses the LTTE of using the civilian population as "human shields" but has ordered the army into the no-fire zone to achieve "total victory" with callous disregard for the trapped civilians.

While aid agencies have certainly reported cases of the LTTE preventing civilians leaving its territory, the main reason for the flight of civilians is the horrific conditions in the no-fire zone. The military has blocked aid supplies, leaving tens of thousands of civilians without adequate food, shelter and medicine. In a tactic designed to create a human stampede, the army has repeatedly and indiscriminately fired artillery salvos into the area.

ICRC director of operations Pierre Krähenbühl yesterday described the present situation as "nothing short of catastrophic". He continued: "Essentially, none of the civilians' basic needs are met at the present, and the fear of epidemics, malnutrition and increased deaths due to the lack of treatment is growing by the day..."

“We believe that there are well in excess of 1,000 wounded people requiring urgent treatment and evacuation from the combat zone. We are very worried that the final offensive in the area by government forces against LTTE fighters could lead to a further dramatic increase in the number of civilian casualties.”

The ICRC noted that the situation has worsened since Monday, when the army captured the village of Putumattalan, which had been used to ferry in limited medical and food supplies. The makeshift hospital in the village has shut down. “They don’t have any medical care available. We are calling both sides to protect civilians and this hasn’t happened until now,” ICRC spokesman Simon Schorno said.

The civilian death toll has been accelerating. The UN estimates that at least 4,500 people have been killed and some 12,000 wounded so far this year. Last month, the US-based Human Rights Watch reported that at least 2,700 civilians had been killed in the no-fire zone this year. The LTTE claims that over 1,000 people have been killed and 2,300 wounded in shelling over the past two days. LTTE spokesman Thileepanm, who spoke to the BBC by telephone with explosions in the background, said the army had hit a hospital, an orphanage and many houses, forcing people to hide under logs and in makeshift bunkers.

Eesan Ketheesan told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio yesterday that he had just spoken briefly to his uncle in the no-fire zone by phone. “Unfortunately he’s screaming and crying out, and there’s a lot of people killed on that day. And it’s basically everywhere they walk it’s just dead bodies... a lot of them were kids this time.”

Many of those fleeing the no-fire zone are wounded. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) yesterday described the chaotic situation at Vavuniya hospital, where more than 400 people were admitted in just 36 hours—almost double the figure for last week. “The buses are still coming and they’re actually unloading dead bodies at times, as some wounded people died on the way,” MSF officer Karen Stewart said.

“Probably 85 percent of people I’ve talked to have witnessed horrific things, like being in a bunker and suddenly a shell goes and it’s killed half of the people in the bunker. Someone else I spoke to told me how she went out to find some water and when she came back everyone in her bunker was dead,” Stewart explained.

The government’s expressions of concern for trapped civilians are belied by its detention of those who have fled the no-fire zone. Far from being dealt with as refugees, they are treated as the enemy and herded into squalid prison camps surrounded by razor wire and guarded by the military. According to MSF, the detention centres near Vavuniya are now grossly overcrowded—“in some cases an entire family has to live in the space of a sofa”.

President Rajapakse, government ministers and the Colombo media have been attempting to whip up an atmosphere of jubilation over the army’s impending victory. He visited Air Force headquarters in Colombo on Monday to watch the video footage of the army breaching the no-fire zone. “The process of the complete defeat of the LTTE has just begun,” he declared triumphantly. “It is now all over for the Tigers.”

Having set a 24-hour deadline from noon Monday for the LTTE’s unconditional surrender, the government is pressing ahead with its final onslaught. Rajapakse brushed aside a call by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown for an extension of a two-day pause in fighting. Reflecting the official contempt for the plight of civilians, Prime Minister Ratnasiri

Wickremanayake derided such international appeals as “a big joke” designed to save the LTTE.

The US, Britain and other major powers pressing for a “humanitarian pause” are not acting out of concern for the thousands of trapped civilians. For more than two years, these governments tacitly supported the Rajapakse government as the Sri Lankan army openly breached the 2002 ceasefire, shelled civilians and abused basic democratic rights. The main fear in Washington is that a humanitarian disaster in northern Sri Lanka will destabilise the island and neighbouring India, cutting across US economic and strategic interests in the region.

For its part, the LTTE continues to issue futile appeals to these same imperialist powers that have backed Rajapakse’s “war on terrorism” and are conducting their own criminal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. An LTTE statement issued on Monday called on the Sri Lankan government to heed the “call of the United States and other members of the international community for a cease-fire”.

The determination of the Rajapakse government to proceed regardless is a sharp warning to the Sri Lankan working class. A military victory will only strengthen the hand of the most reactionary sections of the Colombo ruling elite. Far from bring peace and prosperity, the destruction of the LTTE’s military capacities will set the stage for a new onslaught on working people. Amid a deepening economic crisis, the government will not hesitate to use the vast repressive apparatus built up over 25 years to wage war against workers, farmers and youth seeking to defend their living standards.

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