

SRILANKA

## Conquering Tamil Tigers

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*[The Sri Lankan Civil war has turned to an unprecedented phase when no country including the neighbouring India paid any attention to the appeals by innocent civilians. Over 250,000 have been internally displaced in the area of conflict and there is no NGO functioning due to security reasons. The appeal to the Tamil Nadu government had resulted in some protest rally by Film stars, and some political parties. The threat by Chief Minister M Karunanidhi that the parliamentarians would resign if the Central government did not help the civilians was withdrawn after a discussion with Mr Pranab Mukherjee (Foreign Minister). Only the other day there were severe bombings in the area close to Kilinochchi and Paranthan. The following article relates to the situation and the unpredictable scenario for the Tamils in Sri Lanka.]*

Sri Lanka is pressing ahead with its military campaign in the north of the Indian Ocean island nation to vanquish the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The troops have made considerable progress and are almost knocking on the doors of LTTE's political head-quarters, Kilinochchi, a town almost 300 kilometres north of the capital, Colombo. The success of the operations has sparked off a euphoria in the majority Sinhala community and could turn President Mahinda Rajapaksha into a tiger-taming legend.

The "invincible" Tamil-Tigers, led by the elusive Velupillai Prabhakaran, have reportedly withdrawn from Kilinochchi and other nearby towns with their tails between their legs. The LTTE chief and his senior comrades are now hiding somewhere in the towns of Puthukudiruppu and Mullaitivu, ostensibly in a maze of underground bunkers, safe from aerial attacks frequently mounted by the Sri Lanka Air Force.

While planning field operations to fend off the advancing columns of the Sri Lanka Army, the LTTE leader-ship also tried hard to make political moves to bring pressure on Colombo to ease the military offensive. The Tamil Tigers used their proxies in the Sri Lankan parliament, members of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), to drag India into the conflict.

The TNA parliamentarians appealed to New Delhi for intervention, asking the Indian government to prevail upon the Sri Lankan president to stop the military aggression, in the north of the country because of the intensified conflict. Some 230,000 people have already been displaced and are living in camps.

As New Delhi remained silent, the TNA leaders approached the politicians of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which has an umbilical connection with the Tamils of Sri Lanka. The chief minister of Tamil Nadu and leader of the Dravid Munetra Kazhgam (DMK), M Karunanidhi, responded positively with statements asking the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government in New Delhi to take action and safeguard the interests of Sri Lankan Tamils.

New Delhi responded, not out of humanitarian concerns, rather out of political compulsion. India raved and ranted over the war, expressed concern over civilian casualties and human rights violations, as the United Progressive Alliance Government, which is ruling with a wafer thin parliamentary majority, was under tremendous pressure from its crucial ally, the DMK. The members of parliament from the DMK threatened to resign and reduce the UPA to a powerless minority if the government did not take up the issue with Colombo.

Fear of the consequences forced the UPA government into action. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh spoke with Rajapaksha on the phone and enquired about the situation. He expressed India's concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Tamil-dominated north and the treatment of Tamils by the security forces and the police in the south of Sri Lanka.

Singh did not ask the Sri Lankan president to stop the military offensive. Instead, he assured Rajapaksha that India would send aid, including food, for the displaced. He did urge that Sri Lanka should ensure the safety and well being of the Tamils and that civilians should not be lumped together with the LTTE and treated as terrorists.

After a series of backroom negotiations, Karunanidhi apparently realized that India's hands were tied and that New Delhi's options were limited. In a 2-November signed article published in a Tamil newspaper, *the Murasoli*, Karunanidhi admitted that "A country can intervene in its neighbour's affairs only to a limited extent[S] [New Delhi] has to work within its powers".

Ever since it withdrew its peacekeeping force in 1990 after losing some 1,200 soldiers, India has maintained a hands-off approach toward Sri Lanka, refraining from any overt intervention. The current official line is that the ethnic conflict is an internal matter.

Moreover, India has an intense dislike for the LTTE. The Tamil Tigers reneged on the 1987 Indo-Sri

Lanka Accord and turned their guns on the Indian peacekeepers. More importantly, the LTTE is despised by the Indian establishment as well as the populace for the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi—an act for which the LTTE is paying dearly.

With Rajiv Gandhi's widow Sonia Gandhi as the UPA chair, the peace-keeping experience, and the general animosity toward the LTTE among the people, it would be difficult for New Delhi to intervene directly in Sri Lanka's affairs, especially if its actions were seen to be helping the Tamil rebels.

Director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, Major General Dipankar Banerjee (ret'd), says that any physical involvement in support of the Tamils in Sri Lanka will invite great wrath and hostility toward India.

"That is precisely why India will not interfere now. Prabhakaran committed a grave strategic error by assassinating Rajiv Gandhi and has now to live with the consequences".

It is hard to imagine that the Congress leadership will ever endorse New Delhi's intervention in support of Prabhakaran. Instead, it would like to see the LTTE chief brought to India and executed for Rajiv Gandhi's assassination.

Colombo understands India's limitations and has used them to its advantage. The statements made by the Indian politicians have not deterred the Sri Lankan president from pressing ahead with his "war on terror." Rajapaksha dispatched his younger brother and close confidante, Basil Rajapaksha, to assuage the feelings in New Delhi. The outcome was a joint statement in which both sides made assurances that the civilians will be protected.

Interestingly, even the international community has limited its statements to the protection of civilians caught up in the conflict. Norway and the US, the co-chairs of the peace process and the brokers of the 2002 ceasefire, have merely expressed concern over the humanitarian situation. There is no pressure from them on Colombo to halt the military advance.

Clearly the LTTE is finding itself isolated and ignored by the international community, which until January this year was trying hard to ensure the survival of the ceasefire.

However, Colombo's military victory is not a solution to the ethnic problems in Sri Lanka. Defeating the LTTE might reduce terrorism in the country, but without a political solution, peace will remain elusive.

Indian National Security Adviser M K Narayanan has cautioned Sri Lanka that military victory could lead to intensified terrorism. Splinter groups of the LTTE and other para-military organizations could continue staging attacks.

Therefore, it is imperative to find a political solution to address the grievances and aspirations of the Tamil community.

Rajapaksha is pinning his hopes on conquering the Tamil Tigers, but he has not proposed a political solution to address the ethnic problem. Nor is there a credible move to initiate a political process to find a solution.

Sri Lanka's Tamils fear that the government will not work toward a political resolution if it manages to defeat the Tamil Tigers. This fear is also shared by the international community, as there is no credible political process underway to resolve the conflict.

The few attempts made by the Sri Lankan president were cosmetic and he eventually stood exposed, accused of being a dishonest peace broker.

"Military victory will not bring an end to an ethnic conflict. This has to be resolved through a political process of negotiation resulting in a constitutional settlement. There is no evidence that this government is interested in this at all," according to Dr Pakiasothy Saravanamuttu, executive director of the Colombo-based Center for Policy Alternatives. "Recently, the president said that the war is against LTTE terrorists and a political package is for the Tamil people. But there is no demonstrable progress on the latter".

The international community is urging the government to develop a blueprint of its proposed constitutional solution so that the Tamil community could be brought on board for negotiations.

Saravanamuttu says that the most effective role India can play in Sri Lanka is to "ensure a meaningful political and constitutional settlement of the ethnic problem."

In truth India's role is very limited. And yet "no permanent solution to the ethnic problem is likely to hold without some form of support and acceptance of India".

India is aware of the fact that unless it brings pressure on Sri Lanka, the search for a political solution will remain superficial. Therefore, New Delhi has begun urging Colombo to start the political process and bring all the parties on board to find a negotiated constitutional solution.

However, senior Indian diplomats say that India does not wish to interfere in Sri Lanka's affairs, but would prefer to maintain its geo-political advantage in the region. By maintaining friendly diplomatic and economic ties with Colombo, New Delhi is trying to ensure that China, Pakistan and the US do not find a

foothold in its backyard. India fears that any action that annoys Rajapaksha could make him turn to China and Pakistan, and allow them to set up a base on the island. □□□

*[Source : ISN Security Watch]*