

The Sri Lanka Monitor

No 90

July 1995

Produced by the British Refugee Council

Thousands flee Jaffna offensive

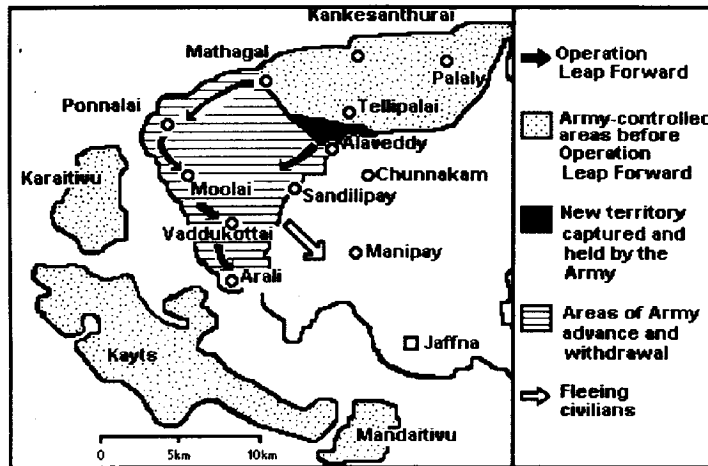
OVER 200,000 civilians fled for their lives after 10,000 Sri Lankan troops launched the biggest military offensive of the 11-year civil war on the Jaffna stronghold of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on 9 July.

In twin thrusts south-east from Palaly towards Chunnakam and west from Mathagal to Moolai *Operation Leap Forward* captured 80 sq kms of the western side of the peninsula as far south as Arali Point. The offensive was accompanied by heavy artillery shelling and aerial bombing. At least 65 people were killed and 150 wounded when an aircraft bombed 2,000 civilians sheltering in St Peter and Paul's church at Navaly near Arali says the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and President Chandrika Kumaratunge has ordered an enquiry.

After five days of falling back the Tigers stemmed the offensive six kms west of Jaffna town at Vaddukottai blowing up the 30-metre causeway and launching a fierce counter-attack code-named *Tiger Leap* (Puli Paichchal) with 2,000 cadre drafted in from Kilinochchi. A LTTE ground-to-air missile shot down a Sri Lankan plane and *Sea Tiger* suicide commandos sank the 2,500-ton *Edithara* in Kankesanthurai harbour on 16 July threatening the Army's major supply route. Over 16 LTTE cadre and three sailors died in the attack.

Preparations for another suicide attack went wrong when a LTTE truck packed with explosives blew up prematurely near Tiger headquarters at Kondavil killing 150 civilians some sources claim. The LTTE says only three Tigers died in the blast and has cordoned off the area.

In ten days of fierce fighting over 71 soldiers were killed and 235 wounded. The Tigers admit to 80 cadre killed and say 245 Jaffna civilians were killed including 63 children and 470 wounded, 250 critically. Most of the civilian casu-



alties were from heavy shelling. There are no independent reports of the fighting.

The Army would not give up even an inch of land recaptured, deputy Defence minister Col. Anuruddha Ratwatte told Parliament on 21 July but the military had already withdrawn to Alaveddy holding on to only six sq kms of new territory. The press were scathing as usual, claiming the Tigers had sucked in the military and hit them with a counter punch while gung ho defence officials maintained that ten military columns were about to take Jaffna town. Housing minister Nalin Siripala de Silva had already flown to Jaffna on 14 July to reorganise civil administration in the captured areas. Col. Ratwatte reportedly blasted Army top brass behind closed doors warning them to take only territory they could hold.

Whether Jaffna town was the ultimate objective remains unclear. New operations commander Lt.Gen.Rohan Daluwatte has shaken up Army tactics using highly mobile patrols to threaten contested territory in addition to the stop-go scenario of Forward Defence Lines and major offensives. Defence sources say over 27 LTTE cadre were killed in deep penetration missions south of Alaveddy, troops reportedly capturing a Pajero landcruiser belonging to LTTE political chief *Thamilchelvan*.

Insiders say a second major offensive from the key Elephant Pass Army base in the south-east of the peninsula will follow after a benign astrological conjunction on 31 July. Simultaneously the government will release its long awaited devolution package designed to woo the Tamils away

from the Tigers. Sri Lankan troops killed 18 LTTE in an attack on a *Sea Tiger* base at Vetrilaikerni a few miles east of Elephant Pass on 28 July to reinforce fragile supply lines to the coast.

But a second Jaffna offensive is unlikely to win many hearts and minds. Jaffna general hospital cruelly understaffed and under-equipped without water without electricity is crammed with hundreds of casualties from indiscriminate bombing and

shelling. The ICRC has urged the government to send fuel and medicine north but bureaucratic delay and unofficial blockade is tightening a noose around the peninsula.

Tamil parties and civil rights groups in the south have condemned the July offensive calling for a ceasefire and new negotiations. Douglas Devananda leader of the Tamil Party EPDP. withdrew his nine MPs from Parliament threatening to implode the fragile ruling coalition in a late July meeting with President Chandrika unless the bombing of the Jaffna Tamils ended.

Other sources say a second offensive is unlikely until wider reaction to the devolutionary package leaked to the press in late July is gauged. Initial Tamil responses are mixed but there appears more on offer than expected. Whether it will be enough for the Tamils or too much for the Sinhalese remains to be seen. The Tigers are unlikely to endorse the package.

The LTTE's military reply to the Jaffna offensive was a disaster when over 200 cadre died in simultaneous attacks on four isolated Army camps in the flash-point Weli Oya region north-east of Vavuniya on 28 July. Most of the dead were young girls and boys under 16. Military sources say they had three days warning of the attack. The reversal will ease the pressure on the Army but will not deter the Tigers. The south's response to the devolution package will determine the next deadly throw of the dice.

THE NORTH

Blockade

THE government's senior official in the Jaffna peninsula, Government Agent (GA) K Ponnambalam issued a desperate plea in a 27 July letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunge for food and medicine for the 200,000 people displaced by the Army's *Operation Leap Forward*.

Mr Ponnambalam says food stocks are exhausted and there has been no response to several urgent messages sent to the President. Although press reports said a food shipment was due in Jaffna in late July, it never arrived. Jaffna needs 9,000 tonnes of food each month. The ICRC has refused to escort food ships to the north after the military curfew was lifted on 20 July, saying that the LTTE had withdrawn an assurance not to attack supply ships. While President Chandrika assured EPDP MP Douglas Devananda that she would not allow the Jaffna people to starve, Justice minister GL Peiris said that negotiations with the ICRC continued.

With over 1,400 people injured in the military operation, facilities have been stretched to the limit. According to the All Ceylon Hindu Association, of those admitted to hospital 170 including 66 children died by 14 July. Jaffna residents say many who succumbed to their injuries could have been saved if sufficient medicines and medical equipment were available. Reports say no medicines have been received despite two doctors from Jaffna arriving in Colombo in mid-July and explaining the desperate situation to Health minister AHM Fowzie. Aid workers say there are also mounting medical shortages in remote Mullaitivu east of Kilinochchi and other northern mainland areas.

Over 57,600 families have fled from Sandilipay, Chankanai and other Jaffna areas. One family fleeing the advancing Army from Alaveddy only later realised that a one month-old baby had been left behind. A plane attacked 40 civilians fleeing from Anaikottai on 9 July, killing 25.

NGO workers said many bodies were lying in the streets in Mavady, Navaly and Anaikottai. According to Mr Ponnambalam the displaced families were sheltering in 97 temporary refugee welfare centres including 72 schools. But by July's end many families had returned home, hearing that the Army had withdrawn.

Bombing and shelling continued even after the government announced that the operation was over. In a hour-long shelling of Jaffna town from Palaly Army base on 25 July, 11 people were injured. Shelling continued the following day damaging several houses in Chunnakam and Uduvil. Those who had returned fled again to other areas.

Two Tigers were killed in clashes as the Army advanced on Valikamam north on 27 July. Two civilians died and three others were injured in Army shelling on the same day in Mallakam. Reports say six people were arrested by the military in the area.

Fisherman Immanuel Anushan, 18, was shot and injured by the Navy while fishing in the Pannai sea in late July. Relatives informed the ICRC that three people fishing off Mandaitivu had disappeared. On 27 July the Navy arrested four fishermen near Araly.

child sacrifice

OVER 200 LTTE cadre most of them women and children under 16 died in abortive attacks on four key Army bases on 28 July in the strategic Weli Oya region linking the north and east.

The Tigers' surprise night attack tactics were thwarted by advance intelligence of the raid and emergency generators which lit up the camp perimeters after electricity was cut making the advancing child soldiers easy targets. Another 40 died on Kokkilai beach from helicopter strafing as 15 *Sea Tiger* boats were sunk. Three women suicide bombers were blown to pieces advancing on Army brigade headquarters.

Brigade Commander Janaka Perera

described it as the greatest victory recorded by the military since fighting began in 1983. Defence sources claim as many as 500 LTTE may have been killed and hundreds more wounded. One soldier and one Home Guard were killed.

Black flags are flying in Jaffna. The Tigers have launched a new round of purges seeking the "traitors" who betrayed the attack. Five Tamil civilians were executed by LTTE at Omanthai in June for giving information to the enemy. Sri Lankan troops raided Mahamaduwa nine kms north-east of the frontline town of Vavuniya in early July killing eight LTTE.

Further west tension is rising on iso-

Missing

Jaffna youths, Varatharajah, 24, and Neethiraja, 23, arrested in south Colombo on 26 June by five armed men in plain clothes are still missing. Wellawatte police deny they are in custody.

News blackout

Posing as a teacher, *Sunday Leader* journalist Pearl Thevanayagam was stopped by the military at the Thandikulam frontline checkpoint on the way to Jaffna. The government has imposed an unofficial news blackout on the north refusing journalists access.

Documents

The government plans to issue a special identity card to over 200,000 Plantation Tamils who lack the necessary documentation to apply for National Identity Cards said Deputy Commissioner of Registration of Persons, Seid Ahmed, at a seminar in Talawakelle.

Protest

Over 60 government MPs led by Labour minister Mahinda Rajapakse signed a memorandum in early July urging President Kumaratunge, not to re-establish diplomatic ties with Israel.

Surrender

Nine LTTE child soldiers surrendered to the military at Ilupadichenai outside Batticaloa in mid July. The Tigers are said to have recruited over 3,000 children in the district in the four months before talks broke down in April.

lated Mannar island with the withdrawal of the Kalpitiya boat service. Local people say food and fuel are scarce, prices are spiralling and relief assistance burdened with bureaucratic delay. Five police died in a landmine ambush near Talaimannar Pier on 20 July and LTTE Mannar commander Masilan Devarajah was killed with several soldiers on 29 July as Tiger attacks continue.

Over 3,000 refugees repatriated from India in March remain trapped in makeshift camps like Talaimannar Railway Station without adequate food rations or sanitary and medical provisions. The Army rules by day and the Tigers by night.

■ The Tigers gain ground in the east

Army chief ambushed

BATTICALOA Army commander Brig. Nalin Angamanna was killed in a landmine ambush on 29 July as the Tigers attacked a nearby Valaichenai Army camp. The brigadier's jeep was in the middle of a convoy of reinforcements suggesting that the mine was command-detonated. He is the highest-ranking officer killed since 1992. Four other soldiers were killed and 14 seriously injured.

The military has now withdrawn all soldiers from west of Batticaloa lagoon despite last month's Thoppigala offensive. Coupled with the retreat from Vaharai, north of the Polonnaruwa road this leaves great tracts of territory under Tiger control. Over 17,000 civilians are desperately short of food in Vaharai after

the military withdrawal reduced to living on lotus tubers. NGOs and the ICRC have been denied permission to take supplies into the area.

The Tigers are now targeting vehicles snatching a bus at Vantharumoolai in early July suggesting a major operation is being planned. LTTE cadre attacked 45 policemen at Thalavai police post three miles from Eravur in mid-July killing five and wounding five more. Over 250 Tigers unsuccessfully attacked a Special Task Force (STF) camp at Thikkodai on 19 July. Local LTTE leader *Ramanan* and four others were killed along with one police commando. Hours later seven soldiers died in a Tiger ambush in Sithandy. Two soldiers were

killed in attacks on Army posts at Vavunativu bridge near Batticaloa town on 29 July.

When the military hits back, it is too often indiscriminate. Police attacked a Valaichenai hamlet on 18 July killing three civilians. Kumaraswamy, a refugee from Vinayagapuram camp was wounded and being taken to hospital by friends when the Army took him into custody. His dead body was found hours later near Paithalai. Mother-of-seven Yesumari, 45 died when a shell hit her home.

Killings of suspected informers and collaborators by LTTE and the military continue. TELO cadre *Mani* was shot dead at Veeracholai near Sammanthurai on 10 July. Former Tiger cadre *Ananthan*, 28, was shot dead by three youths near Eravur two days later. TM Samsudeen, 52, was killed at Kuchchaveli north of Trincomalee town by three men in Army fatigues.

Trincomalee remains tense as the military withdrawal from Vaharai poses a new threat from the south. Three LTTE cadre and four soldiers died after 100 Tigers attacked an Army camp south of Kattaiparichchan on 21 July. Soldiers captured *Kuttikannan* said to be said to be a key LTTE intelligence operative at Kumburupiddy north of Trincomalee town a few days earlier. Trincomalee fishermen have been badly hit by the fishing ban. The military are now recruiting women Home Guards for the first time in Trincomalee as fears mount of a major attack.

Massacre

AT least 65 Tamils were killed and over 150 badly injured when a Sri Lankan aircraft dropped six bombs on 2,000 frightened civilians crammed into the courtyard of St Peter and Paul's Church, Navaly during the government's Jaffna offensive on 9 July. Jaffna's Catholic Bishop Thomas Savundranayagam and a host of international church and human rights NGOs condemned the attack and President Chandrika Kumaratunge has called for an enquiry. Foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar's response was to censure the ICRC for releasing news of the incident before informing the government and relationships remain tense despite an apology from local ICRC representative Marco Altherr. LTTE sources say over 120 civilians died in the attack. Another four were killed when a nearby Hindu temple at Manipay was bombed. Colombo Tamil newspaper *Virakesari* says over 100 bodies arrived at Jaffna general hospital in the first day of the offensive. The scene was one of mayhem with

hundreds of people fleeing in bullock carts, tractor-loads of wounded and shell explosions every few minutes. Over 14 people died in a direct hit on one bullock cart. The dying were stacked in hospital corridors the floor slippery with blood. Without water, electricity and vital medical equipment and supplies many died unnecessarily or had limbs amputated in a flickering nightmare of darkness and pain. While students queued to give blood over 70 refugee camps were set up in colleges and schools as 200,000 people flooded into Jaffna town.

There is mounting fear of famine and large-scale epidemic and NGOs say bureaucratic delay and the ICRC's continuing wrangle with the government over conditions for escorting relief ships has conveniently strengthened the unofficial blockade of the peninsula.

Creeping south

OVER 30,000 Muslim refugees in Puttalam have received death threats on LTTE notepaper if they do not leave the area by 1 August. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) General Secretary Rauf Hakeem described the letters as a hoax similar to those sent to prominent eastern Muslims last month.

Over 20,000 Muslims were expelled from Mannar and another 10,000 from Jaffna and Mullaitivu by a LTTE ultimatum in September 1990, forcing them to leave in 24 hours with little more than the clothes on their backs. After five long years in Puttalam refugee camps, disputes have grown with local people over water and land.

The Tigers are creeping south from their Wilpattu jungle stronghold, safe-

guarding their key supply route for fuel and weapons by sea from Tuticorin in south India. Five National Guard were killed and another five wounded in a LTTE attack on 25 July at Eluvankulam, where Muslim refugees are being resettled. Over 200 refugee huts burned down at Puttalam Saltern C camp on 18 July as Muslim fears grew of the Tiger threat.

The vast Wilpattu jungle tracts offer a safe haven for the Tigers to strike out at Sinhalese targets further east in Anuradhapura District. Three police were killed along with one Home Guard and a civilian when LTTE attacked a police post at Mahavilachchiya on 10 July. Tantrimale a centre of Sinhalese colonisation a few miles north is a favourite Tiger target.

Tamil student cheats Colombo death squads *back from the dead*

ONE young Colombo Tamil met the military's shadowy death squads and lived - thanks to frantic appeals to senior police and Army officers by his lawyer father P Pathmanathan after he disappeared.

Royal College student Ajanthan was snatched opposite Fort railway station on 18 July. His head was shaved and he was held naked and blindfolded in a darkened room with several other Tamils without food or water for two days before being released.

Many say his father's appeal to friends in high places confirms security forces involvement in torture and murder as a response to the Tiger suicide bomb threat to the capital. The 11 shaven-headed emaciated corpses floating in Bolgoda lake last month were all Tamils says an official enquiry.

Amnesty International has issued an urgent appeal on behalf of MC Masilan, Shanmuganathan and Thiruparan, three young Tamils arrested in northern Colombo in early June. Over 50 Tamils have disappeared in the city in the last

two months. Thousands of Colombo's 350,000 Tamil population are screened every day at roadblocks and security checkpoints. Police believe Tiger suicide squads have penetrated the capital, hidden among the 150,000 refugees from the North-East war.

Police confirmed all North-East Tamils in Colombo must register at local police stations despite departing police chief Frank Silva's denial. Amnesty wants the police to issue receipts for those arrested but new human rights guidelines announced by the President last month say only on request. Another eight major safeguards proposed by Tamil party TULF have been ignored.

Ellalan Force reportedly a LTTE front issued a new bomb threat to Colombo in early July and there were three minor explosions around the city as the Army's Jaffna offensive got underway. Police have been remarkably successful so far in curbing the LTTE threat. Krishnan Selvarajah alias *Kannan* arrested in Kotahena on 11 July had instruc-

tions to assassinate a leading Tamil opposition politician, authorities claim. Two other Tamils were also arrested. There are now plans to photograph thousands of Colombo taxi drivers following new intelligence of a Tiger taxi network.

Police say a cargo ship which tried to enter Colombo harbour on 21 July after being denied permission is registered to a Tamil in Singapore. Authorities have banned boats carrying less than 1,600 tonnes to prevent a Tiger attack. Coastal traders launched a protest in Madras to reinstitute the lucrative trade in spices and vegetables of 500,000 tonnes a year.

American national Rev. Kenneth Mulder was deported after 40 police raided the National Christian Council (NCC) Colombo offices and found a computer design of a bleeding lotus mocking President Chandrika's new *Sudum Nelum* (White Lotus) campaign of support for the military launched in early July. Police also searched the lodgings of five female Tamil NCC staff. NCC and other church bodies have protested.

Inhuman cargo

AFTER hours of frantic cries for help, 18 Sri Lankans slowly suffocated to death hidden in a sealed container truck in a deserted car park in western Hungary on 15 July. The driver panicked 30 miles from the German border unlocking one compartment before abandoning the lorry. Another 18 Sri Lankans survived and are in a Budapest hospital.

Their tragedy is part of the growing trade in "human cargo" where thousands of Sri Lankans each year will risk their lives or life savings to be smuggled west to claim political asylum. Another 30 Sri Lankans "packed like sardines" in an abandoned truck in Saxony, Germany were rescued by police on 27 July.

Human cargo is big business dominated by organised crime and has mushroomed with the fall of communism and the relaxation of border controls in Europe. Three top Tamil businessmen are said to control the Colombo end but with over 10,000 Sri Lankans last year willing to pay up to Rs 500,000 (\$10,000) each to be smuggled west the militant groups take their cut of what is a \$100 million-a-year business.

Ratnarajah, one of the death truck sur-

vivors paid an agent \$10,000 in Matale to send him to Moscow, the major exit route, on a ten-day student visa. Other agents smuggled him to Bulgaria where he joined the lorry bound for Germany, one of the most popular destinations.

Seven people are currently under arrest for involvement in the truck deaths including two Sri Lankans resident in Bulgaria. Sri Lanka's acting Foreign Secretary MK Rajalingam says he hopes the tragic deaths will act as a deterrent.

Philippe Labreux head of the Budapest mission of UN refugee agency UNHCR has rejected Ratnarajah and all the others' applications for political asylum after consultation with UNHCR, Colombo. Hungary signed the UN Refugee Convention in 1989 and leaves decision-making on non-European refugees to UNHCR.

The other popular and dangerous entry point is by sea on Baltic fishing boats to liberal Scandinavia. Three Sri Lankans were among 75 Asians rescued from four lifeboats off Denmark on 31 July. But Denmark is unlikely to welcome them with open arms. Refugee workers say tough new asylum regulations in countries like Germany disqualifying refugees who travel through any country on its borders is driving the asylum process underground - and those who seek refuge to increasingly desperate measures.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas.

If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact

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ISSN 0955-5943

Funded by voluntary agencies worldwide.

Technology by RaR DTP

Printed by Printco, 374 Willesden High Rd, London NW10