



SRI LANKA: THE BATTLE FOR JAFFNA

The dramatic advance of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) into the Jaffna peninsula, the heart of the Tamil area, is a shattering blow for Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga and raises concerns of regional instability for India. The immediate danger is massive bloodshed, with upwards of 25,000 Sri Lankan troops still in Jaffna city and the risk of renewed ethnic violence in the rest of the country if they are killed in large numbers. **In the longer term, the prospects for Sri Lanka's fragile peace efforts have been badly undercut. Reviving them will require a much more radical approach to power sharing than the government has been willing to consider in the past.** This will be very hard to sell to both the Sinhalese political mainstream and the LTTE, but it will only get harder with time.

An astonishing victory: The LTTE's arrival at the gates of Jaffna is an extraordinary accomplishment. The battle for Jaffna capped more than six months of sustained conventional war, a first for this guerrilla army whose signature operation is suicide bombing. Starting on November 1, 1999, The LTTE has been on a campaign to eliminate the military gains won by the Sri Lankan army four years earlier. The prize was Jaffna, an all-Tamil city of several hundred thousand and the heart of the Tamil areas in Sri Lanka, where the LTTE had run a quasi-state from 1990 to 1995. By January, the Tigers were approaching Elephant Pass, the only land connection between Jaffna and the rest of Sri Lanka and an area the army had controlled during the 1990-95 period. The fighting around the pass lasted over three months, until the pass fell on April 22. By all estimates, the attacking LTTE were greatly outnumbered by the defending army forces.

For the army, a disastrous reverse: Losing Elephant Pass is a spectacular failure on the army's part. The army's conquest of Jaffna city and large parts of the Wannu between October 1995 and early 1996 was the most visible military accomplishment of the Kumaratunga government. The political and strategic importance of the pass, and the LTTE's determination to take it, had been obvious for at least six months. The army had moved its best divisions to Jaffna in March, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they had been sloppy about preserving vital sources of water. The causes of this failure will no doubt be much analyzed in the future, but they appear to go to the heart of the army's leadership, training, and basic competence. In addition to Elephant Pass, the Palaly air base and a port on the northern coast of the peninsula had remained in army hands during 1990-95; the LTTE is making a maximum effort to push the army out of these positions as well.

Colombo in shock: The government and the political mainstream have reacted to the Battle of Jaffna with near panic. A drumbeat of war talk and rigorous censorship make the conflict more real and more immediate than it has normally been for the average Sri Lankan. The initial reaction of political parties outside the government was to call for national unity in this hour of crisis, but this may not last long if further military reverses follow.

Complicating this already volatile picture is the parliamentary election, which under the constitution must be held by August, and must be held in every district at the same time. Speculation is rife about whether the election will be postponed under pressure of the war, and what that might mean for Sri Lanka's future governance.

The short term goal: avoiding a bloodbath: The LTTE is determined to complete its conquest of the peninsula. The Sri Lankan Army, with some 25-40,000 troops in the peninsula, is bent on retaining a significant foothold. The battle has continued in the peninsula for nearly six weeks since Elephant Pass, with the LTTE moving closer to Jaffna and the army hanging on, receiving occasional shipments of supplies. In early May, the Sri Lankan government rejected the LTTE offer of a ceasefire to permit the safe evacuation (and surrender) of the army units in Jaffna.

Looking ahead, the first priority is to prevent a humanitarian disaster if possible.

- A fresh flow of refugees has already started, with persistent reports of India turning aside refugee boats.

- If the LTTE takes the rest of the Jaffna peninsula without a negotiated evacuation, there could be a wholesale slaughter of Sri Lankan troops.
- This could spawn ethnic violence against Tamils living in the south. Violence tends to polarize the political scene and push wavering Tamils toward the LTTE. The Tigers' attack on a Buddhist temple in the predominantly Tamil city of Batticaloa in mid-May suggests that they are willing to provoke attacks. Since the ethnic riots of 1983, there has been no major ethnic violence, and this government is very conscious of the need to prevent communal trouble. However, given the emotional pitch stirred up by the fighting, it may be a tough job.
- Finally, one can expect a bloodletting in areas newly conquered by the LTTE, as they eliminate local residents accused of "collaborating" with the Sri Lankan army.

Dimmed chances for peace: More ominously, the military situation badly undercuts the Norwegian government's effort to arrange new talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The Norwegian role became publicly known in January, and the government had been consulting with the other political parties, including the principal opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), to develop a common negotiating approach derived from the constitutional proposals the government put forward in 1995.

The 1995 proposals called for greater devolution of power within a structure closely resembling the present Sri Lankan provincial arrangement. These proposals should have been a good starting point when they were first launched. Under present circumstances, however, there is no chance of engaging the LTTE on that basis. The only chance would lie in a much more radical approach to power sharing. A loose confederal structure, with some kind of explicit recognition of the Tamils as a collective group within it and with stronger guarantees of their inclusion in power at the national level, might be more successful. Two draft Canadian constitutions proposed that certain legislative changes would require a "double majority" of both English and French-speaking parliamentarians; an analogous provision might be useful. Obviously, this type of radical departure would be intensely controversial in the Sri Lankan political mainstream. But half measures will only prolong the country's agony.

Even this will be difficult to sell to the LTTE, which will surely feel that its drive for independence is vindicated by its military success. Especially if the Tigers succeed in taking the city of Jaffna and reestablishing their quasi-state, they are likely to argue even more strongly than in 1995 that the only thing to discuss is their claim to ethnically mixed eastern Sri Lanka. But the Tigers are unlikely to receive any international recognition for their claims, so the path to legitimacy may ultimately have to come through negotiations.

The international response: For India, the crisis is a major headache. India lost over 1000 troops during its three years of maintaining a peacekeeping force in Sri Lanka from 1987-1990, and has made clear that it will not consider military intervention. However, the LTTE represents a force for instability in the region, and there is concern that they might reignite otherwise dormant separatist sentiments among India's Tamils. The fractious Indian Tamil political scene has already been split by a handful of calls for India to support an independent Tamil "Eelam" in Sri Lanka. For the moment, India has left the door open to two types of involvement in Sri Lanka: humanitarian support and negotiating help. It is an open secret that India has been making preparations to help in a possible future evacuation of the troops from Jaffna, should that be requested following a ceasefire. Compared with ten years ago, however, India is both more ambivalent about getting involved, and less optimistic about being able to influence the LTTE.

Within Sri Lanka, the crisis has produced some uncharacteristic calls for international help. The Buddhist clergy, normally strong opponents of foreign involvement in Sri Lanka, made a highly publicized plea for Indian intervention. In another sudden reversal, the Sri Lankan government in early May established diplomatic relations with Israel, ten years after an Israeli diplomatic office was closed down in deference to the political views of Sri Lankan Muslims. Arms supply requests have gone to a long list of countries. While some supplies have come in, the most important ingredient in reversing the fortunes of the Sri Lankan army - if it can be done - is not equipment but skill and training.

U. S. policy thus far has been to prepare quietly for humanitarian support and to support the Norwegian-backed peace efforts. The United States has made clear that it would not recognize an independent Eelam.

Moving forward: Prospects for addressing the humanitarian impact of this crisis are reasonably good, but the chances for moving forward toward peace and stability are poor. The LTTE's quasi-state in northern Sri Lanka was a harshly repressive place, criticized from within as well as without for arbitrary justice and intolerance.

The kind of dramatic peace proposal needed to galvanize serious talks is almost impossible for either side to launch under present circumstances. The stakes are high, however. The last five years have been the bloodiest in the history of Sri Lanka's ethnic strife. Continuing that bloodshed will only make the peacemaker's task harder.

The South Asia Monitor is published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific public policy positions. Accordingly, all views expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors.