

Liberation Tigers assault unprepared army in Sri Lanka

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

After lying low for months, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a very well-knit group of terrorists based in Sri Lanka, overran an Army camp at Mullaitivu on the northeast coast, killing or capturing the entire garrison of more than 1,000 men, reports indicate. The assault, launched on July 18, is considered the bloodiest in the 13-year war between the Tigers and the Sri Lankan security forces. Opposition party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe called it "the worst military defeat" that the Sri Lankan Army has suffered at the Tigers' hands. Sri Lankan troops backed by armor, artillery, and air have since regained control.

Although the Sri Lankan authorities were taken by surprise and the Army was unprepared, the Tigers' offensive had been clearly under preparation for some time. Last Dec. 5, the government took control of a Tiger stronghold in the Valikamam division of the Jaffna town, but following successful completion of the Army offensive—Operation Riviresa—the Tigers had been slowly infiltrating back in. On July 4, a "human bomb" went off in the heart of Jaffna town in an attempt to assassinate Housing Minister Nimal Sripala de Silva. Although he escaped unharmed, it is evident that the Tigers have recouped their losses and are beginning to hit back.

Besides the success of Operation Riviresa, which knocked out a few of the Tigers' teeth, a number of other developments spurred the Tiger offensive. To begin with, the new United Front government in India under Prime Minister Deve Gowda informed visiting Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar that New Delhi attaches the highest importance to developing cordial and cooperative relations with all neighboring countries, both bilaterally and within the framework of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Prime Minister Deve Gowda told Foreign Minister Kadirgamar, who carried a personal letter to him from Sri Lankan President Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunga, that he looked forward to building upon the existing close ties with Sri Lanka. Subsequently, it was reported that the Indian Navy is escorting Sri Lankan ships between the northern town of Jaffna and Trincomalee, Sri Lanka's eastern port. Earlier this year, the Tigers reported from London that their ship *Horizon* was destroyed by the Indian Navy on Feb. 14. The charge was denied by both the Indian and Sri Lankan authorities.

In addition, New Delhi announced on June 12 that the

Union Cabinet had decided to continue the ban on all LTTE activities on Indian soil for another two years. The ban, set to expire on July 14, was originally imposed following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991, and the latest extension followed news reports that Liberation Tigers have once again been using the Point Calimere route to gain entry into the Indian coastal state of Tamil Nadu.

Misinformation planted in Philadelphia

On July 14, only four days before the Tigers launched their massive assault on the Mullaitivu Army camp, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that the United States and Sri Lanka were seeking closer military ties and that Washington was toying with the idea of an American military presence on the island. The U.S. State Department has not denied the story completely, but it has ruled out any existing plan for a future American military presence in Sri Lanka.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* report, which put both Washington and New Delhi on the defensive, provided the Tigers the necessary assurance to strike while Sri Lanka, the United States, and India sort out the controversy. The report was deliberately biased to create confusion among the strategists in India and China, claiming: "The American military is attracted to the island's prime location between West Asia and the Far East and near China. Sri Lanka is seeking a political counterbalance to its giant neighbor India." Further, the article was designed to sow suspicion in New Delhi about Colombo's backhanded deal with Washington.

While the *Inquirer* article was planted to cause temporary confusion among the authorities in Washington, New Delhi, and Colombo, and in effect made the Sri Lankan troops temporarily vulnerable, the Tigers also took advantage of Colombo's benign neglect at home. It is being reported only now that the Tigers had virtually taken over the Yala National Park, a wildlife sanctuary southeast of Colombo, to arm and regroup. On July 17, it came to light that a large group of armed men had briefly held some local tourists and a Czech couple in custody and released them on July 12-13. In fact, the Tigers had been using motor boats to get in and out of the wildlife sanctuary, and on June 14 had torched a rest house.

Despite this, the park authorities claim that the park was open. But, a senior parks department official told a news briefing on July 17 that the sanctuary staff had deserted their posts, fearing an attack by the Tigers.

In recent months, a number of news items have indicated that the wildlife sanctuaries in South Asia, particularly in the northern Indian provinces of Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh along the Himalayas, have become the stronghold of narcotics smugglers and those who deal in wildlife articles. It was reported earlier that the Manas National Park, a wildlife sanctuary in the northeast, where the Indian province of Assam borders the Kingdom of Bhutan, has become the training ground of such powerful secessionist terrorists as the United Liberation Front of Asom and the Bodoland Security Force.