

Sri Lanka: Army captures Kilinochchi, editor murdered

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On January 2, after five months of fighting, the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) finally captured the town of Kilinochchi in northern Sri Lanka.

Kilinochchi had for many years been the administrative centre for areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a group fighting for self-determination for Tamils living in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

The population of Kilinochchi had been evacuated to other LTTE-controlled areas before the SLA entered the town, which had been devastated by aerial and artillery bombardment.

Since capturing Kilinochchi, the SLA has made other territorial gains, including the capture of the Elephant Pass, which links the Jaffna peninsula to the mainland.

Most journalists see the capture of Kilinochchi as a major victory for the government. But some disagree.

Vasanthan Raja, editor of *Lanka Eye*, argues that the LTTE has changed its tactics: instead of trying to hold major towns such as Kilinochchi, they will carry out guerrilla attacks from the jungle. Raja says that "the overwhelming majority of Sri Lanka's army is now stretched to its limits in Tamil areas ... Thus, over 100,000 soldiers are occupying Tamil areas — primarily as garrisons concentrated mainly in tiny towns surrounded by the jungle ... The military has to provide regular supplies from the south to maintain the garrisons; and the supply routes will constantly be under the threat of guerrilla attacks."

The war has had a terrible effect on the civilian population. A statement by the Australian Federation of Tamil Associations (AFTA) refers to the SLA's northern offensive, which began in late 2007 after a similar offensive in the east, as a "genocidal military onslaught ... Because of the indiscriminate artillery and multi barrel shelling and aerial bombardment, more than 300,000 people were forced to flee the advancing army of occupation and become IDPs [internally displaced people] in their own homeland, while thousands fled across the sea to nearby India.

"Some of the IDPs have been on the move for nearly a year now and have been living without permanent shelters, exposed to the heavy monsoon rains."

AFTA said it was "shocked and dismayed by the absolute silence maintained by the international community" about this onslaught. It appealed for action by various countries, including the US, India and Australia, to bring about an immediate ceasefire, and to "persuade the Sri Lankan government to enter into peace negotiations with the LTTE to find a political solution that recognises the right to self-determination of the Tamil people".

However, the US government has rejected the idea of negotiations with the LTTE. A statement issued by the US embassy in Colombo welcomed the SLA's capture of Kilinochchi, and said: "We hope it will help hasten an end to the conflict ... The US does not advocate that the government of

Sri Lanka negotiate with the LTTE, a group designated by the United States since 1997 as a foreign terrorist organisation".

Instead the US advocated that the Sri Lankan government talk to other Tamil groups to reach "a political solution that Tamils ... see as legitimate", in the hope that this would "erode the support of the LTTE".

While the government is waging war on the Tamil people of the north, it is also repressing dissent in the predominantly Sinhalese south of Sri Lanka. Lasantha Wickramatunga, the editor of the *Sunday Leader*, a weekly newspaper critical of the government of president Mahinda Rajapaksa, was murdered by "unknown gunmen" on January 8.

This is part of a pattern of violent attacks on critics of the government. Amnesty International said last year that at least ten media workers were killed over a two-year period, while others were abducted, detained or had disappeared.

Wickramatunga himself had been attacked several times before, and expected to be murdered. He wrote an article to be published after his death, in which he said: "When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me".

P.S.

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