

Sri Lanka's military showdown may not be the end of its war with Tamil separatists

Written by Damien Kingsbury

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DAMIEN KINGSBURY, APR 23 2009

Sri Lanka's battle to militarily defeat the country's separatist Tamil Tigers appears to be heading towards its final moments, as the Sri Lankan army continues to pound the sliver of land still occupied by the Tigers and desperate Tamil civilians. While, the Sri Lankan government has been saying for months that a military victory is imminent, it does increasingly appear that the Tamil Tigers will soon be destroyed as a conventional military force, along with a bloodbath of trapped Tamil civilians.

An offer by the Sri Lankan government for the Tamil Tigers to surrender was ignored. Not only have the Tigers vowed never to be captured – each fighter wears a cyanide capsule around his or her neck – they can expect little mercy at the hands of the overwhelmingly Sinhalese Sri Lankan army.

It is estimated that there are still tens of thousands of civilians still occupying a few square kilometres of land on the coast in north-east Sri Lanka, with perhaps a thousand or so Tamil Tigers fighters. In recent days, tens of thousands more Tamils have escaped into the hands of Sri Lankan forces, to be put into 'relocation camps', a euphemism for what are in effect open prisons. Many more Tamil civilians are either being held by the Tamil Tigers, or have chosen not to leave, fearing their fate at Sri Lankan army hands.

Until last year, the Tamil Tigers have fared well as they have built a conventional military force. However, the election four years ago of Mahinda Rajapaksa as president on a platform of military wiping out the Tamil Tigers spelled the end of a military stalemate, as well as the 2002 Norwegian brokered ceasefire.

Among the mistakes made by the Tigers was not allowing Tamils to vote in those elections, which gave Rajapaksa his slim victory. The Tiger's murder in 1991 of Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi alienated potential Indian support, which is also widely acknowledged as one of their greatest strategic errors in an almost three decade long struggle to create a separate homeland.

Behind the conflict has lain what Tamils regard as majority Sinhalese discrimination, in particular in relation to language policy in which Tamil is effectively sidelined from government administration. Many Sinhalese also believe that Sri Lanka is an island holy to Buddha, in which Hindu Tamils do not belong. The civil war was preceded by years of communal strife and rioting, in which hundreds, perhaps thousands of Tamils were killed by Sinhalese mobs.

As the final moments of this battle between two conventional armies plays out, the Sri Lankan government is claiming that it will represent an end to the Tamil Tigers. Yet already Tiger units have appeared behind Sri Lankan government lines. Claims there are about a thousand Tiger fighters trapped does not account for thousands more, who now appear prepared to continue more of a guerrilla or terrorist-style operation.

It is likely in the coming days that the Tamil Tigers lose their last piece of territory. However, without a political agreement to address the grievances of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, it is likely that Sri Lanka will continue to be beset by a different, and perhaps more intractable, type of conflict.

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