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Resumption of Sri Lanka War Tests Civilians' Endurance

By Somini Sengupta

NEW DELHI — The entrenched ethnic conflict on the island nation of Sri Lanka has sunk into the vise grip of war once more, leaving a trail of fear and devastation that is no less chilling for its familiarity.

A 2002 cease-fire between the government in Colombo and separatist Tamil rebels has been effectively ended by six weeks of armed confrontation, though neither side has declared the truce void. The new wave of battles, which began ostensibly over control of an irrigation channel in the north, have grown into full-scale military exchanges across pockets of the north and east and are the deadliest outbreak since the truce.

The Sri Lankan government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have said in recent days that they will return to the negotiating table to revisit the truce. But quarrels over the time and place of talks, with the government's demand of a guarantee that the rebels will not use any break in fighting to regroup and rearm, have already raised questions about their readiness to engage.

"In my view, politically the Sri Lankan government is making a mistake in not opting to open political negotiations at a time the L.T.T.E. is militarily down," Gen. Ashok Kumar Mehta, a chief of the Indian peacekeeping mission in Sri Lanka in the late 1980's, said last week here in the Indian capital. "Because there never can be a military solution to this problem."

At the moment, two things appear certain. First, the government has scored important victories in the latest skirmishes, encouraging it to keep fighting.

Second, the administration of President Mahinda Rajapakse, elected last November with the backing of hard-line Sinhalese nationalists who reject the notion of autonomy for the country's ethnic minorities, has so far floated no power-sharing deals.

How and by whom an ethnically mixed Sri Lanka is governed is at the heart of this war. The Tamil Tigers have fought for independence from the ethnic Sinhalese majority for more than 20 years.

"There is a question mark about the government's willingness to put forward a realistic proposal that would go at least halfway to meeting the Tamil people's aspirations, let alone L.T.T.E. aspirations," said Jehan Perera, an independent analyst with the National Peace Council, a research and advocacy group based in

Colombo.

The roots of the current battles reach to the election of Mr. Rajapakse. Shortly after that, the rebels were blamed for a series of provocations - assassinations and land mine attacks on soldiers. At first, the government was widely credited for exercising restraint.

But by April, the gloves were off. After an attempted assassination against the army chief by a suicide bomber, the air force began to bomb suspected rebel sites - including, in August, a former orphanage where truce monitors say at least 19 children were killed.

Early this month, for the first time since the cease-fire, the Sri Lankan Army seized a strategic eastern patch held by the rebels. Last week, the army said its troops, moving south from government-held northern Jaffna peninsula, had breached rebel front lines. The rebels denied that claim. On Sunday, government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels exchanged gunfire and skirmished at sea, ending a four-day lull in fighting around the Jaffna Peninsula.

In military terms, the big question now is whether and how soon government troops will make a move on rebel-held Elephant Pass, a narrow skein of land that wends from the Tamil Tiger-held jungle across lagoons to the Jaffna Peninsula. Each side has tried repeatedly to seize it from the other, making the pass famous as a symbol of Sri Lanka's decades of bloodshed.

But in human terms, the question is how much more civilians can bear. Abductions and disappearances, familiar ghosts in this country of some 20 million, have returned. The National Human Rights Commission said Friday that it had documented 419 cases of missing people since December. Refugees have once again poured across the Gulf of Mannar and into India - 13,000 since January, according to the United Nations.

The death toll this year has exceeded 1,900, a little more than half of them civilians, according to the international Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission. The monitoring mission, which was created as part of the 2002 truce, has itself become a casualty of the renewed fighting. After the European Union added the Tamil Tigers to its list of banned terrorist groups in May, the rebels insisted that truce monitors who came from European Union member countries leave. The mission shrank by half, to about 30 monitors.

The impact of the war can be felt most acutely in Tamil-majority Jaffna Peninsula, which sits at the top of the tear-shaped island at its closest reach to India. Transportation corridors by road and sea are effectively blocked. The World Food Program says the government will allow only shipments by sea; the Tamil Tigers will not guarantee safety on the sea. One Jaffna resident said by telephone that the price of fuel was three times what it cost on the rest of the island. Another said

it had become difficult to withdraw cash from the bank because flights from Colombo, which transport currency, had been suspended. Some parents were afraid to send their children to school.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, one of the only agencies able to cross government-rebel front lines, says it is working to re-establish contact among relatives who have had to flee their homes.

A report by the University Teachers for Human Rights, an independent Sri Lankan advocacy group, presented a list of killings it accused state security forces of committing, followed by a list of other killings that it accused the rebels of committing. Most of the first set of victims were suspected of having links to the Tamil Tigers. On the second list was a musician who had turned down requests to perform in rebel-held areas.

"The L.T.T.E. is once again fighting a war in the midst of civilian populations, and has made them inevitable targets of state retaliation by forcing civilians to be part of their provocations," the report said. "The government's knee-jerk reaction shows equally little regard for the fate of those civilians. If the L.T.T.E. fires shells, the government will retaliate."

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