

## Kilinochchi's fall a major setback to LTTE

Ten years after they captured the northern Sri Lankan town of Kilinochchi in a blitzkrieg that stunned the world, the Tamil Tigers have finally lost it to a military determined to crush the rebels. The fall of Kilinochchi after months of fighting is a huge blow to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Kilinochchi is a small but strategically located town that served as the political hub of the once sprawling LTTE territory in the north and east of the island. It was where LTTE leaders met diplomats and met government representatives during congenial times. It is where LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran, once the emperor of all that he purveyed, spoke to the media in 2002, just two months after signing a Norway-brokered ceasefire agreement with Colombo.

Most important, Kilinochchi town sat on a winding highway known as A9 that linked Jaffna in the northern tip to the rest of Sri Lanka. Once A9 fell to the Tigers, the government had no option but to keep feeding supplies to the military in Jaffna by sea and air, making the war extremely costly.

Kilinochchi was thus a constant sore thumb for Colombo, where Mahinda Rajapaksa came to power in November 2005, ironically due to a blunder by the LTTE that asked the Tamils to boycott the presidential polls. The fiat spiked the prospects of the other contender, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who as prime minister signed the 2002 truce with the LTTE.

The LTTE argument was simple. Wickremesinghe may have signed the peace pact but his aim was to create an international safety net for Sri Lanka. He was compared to a python that would quietly devour the Tamils one day, even if the world saw him as man of peace. The Sinhalese nationalist Rajapaksa was called a cobra - an identifiable enemy. The surmise was that with a Rajapaksa ruling Sri Lanka, it would be easy for the LTTE to re-ignite the Tamil-Sinhalese war.

The LTTE did precisely that, from about the end of 2005, with disastrous consequences, leading first to the loss of the entire eastern province in 2007 and now to the fall of Kilinochchi.

As the Rajapaksa regime celebrates the victory in Kilinochchi, which has come at the cost of tremendous suffering for the civilian population in the northeast, the question being asked is: what will the LTTE do now?

As it has done in similar circumstances in the past, the LTTE will follow a twin path. The bulk of its fighters, the leadership included, will take shelter in the more impenetrable Mullaitivu, the last district in the Tamil majority north still under Tiger control. This is where Prabhakaran was based when he spearheaded the earlier bitter war against the Indians. This is where the group has built seemingly secure underground bunkers that have served the LTTE chief and his lieutenants well until now.

At the same time, when things become relatively quiet, the LTTE would want to unleash hit and run attacks against the military. So Colombo is most unlikely to ease pressure on the Tigers. This means that Sri Lanka is unlikely to see peace in the short run, Kilinochchi or no Kilinochchi.

Informed sources say that the LTTE has recently managed to smuggle in a new load of arms and ammunition into northern Sri Lanka. If that is true, one can expect more fireworks from the LTTE. Since neither Colombo nor the Tigers appears eager for genuine peace talks, it will be safe to conclude that there is no light at the end of the tunnel of war.

*M.R. Narayan Swamy ( © IANS / India eNews)*