

Tamils step up terror attacks. (1995, October 27) *The Globe and mail.*

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A Sinhalese woman walks past a soldier yesterday after fleeing massacre of villagers in Sri Lanka. (WARUNA KARUNATILLEKE/Reuters)

Tamils step up terror attacks

Rebels kill another 24 villagers in raids on Sinhalese in northeastern Sri Lanka

BY JOHN STACKHOUSE
The Globe and Mail

NEW DELHI — Tamil rebels appear to have heightened their campaign of terror in Sri Lanka with brutal precision, shooting and hacking to death at least 24 villagers yesterday and threatening to push the country back into a chasm of ethnic hatred.

The Sri Lankan military said members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam attacked two Sinhalese villages in northeastern Sri Lanka before dawn yesterday, killing at least 24 people, wounding 15 more and torching more than 40 huts. Among the dead were seven children, including a six-day-old baby.

With five such attacks in the past six days, the rebels have killed more than 110 civilians, most of them Sinhalese, and cut to the heart of Sri Lanka's political divide.

Military officials said the rebel group wants to divert the army's attention from the northern Jaffna Peninsula, where for the past 10 days the two sides have been engaged in fierce fighting that, according to government sources, has claimed the lives of 126 soldiers and 455 rebels.

"The terrorists are desperate because they can't face our army in Jaffna," military spokesman Brigadier Munasinghe told reporters.

The fighting has also pushed tens of thousands of Tamils from their homes in northern Sri Lanka.

In an interview, a senior Tamil politician said the government should halt its massive offensive in Jaffna to spare innocent civilians. "The situation is



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getting out of hand," said Muralukku Sivasithamparam, president of the Tamil United Liberation Front, a small party that supports President Chandrika Kumaratunga's one-seat majority in parliament.

He said 30,000 to 40,000 Tamils have fled their homes in Jaffna, and many are now beyond the reach of relief agencies that ship food to the northern peninsula on the government's behalf.

K. Ponnambalam, the top government administrator in Jaffna, who works under rebel supervision, told Reuters' News Agency that 10 civilians were killed when air force jets bombed Jaffna city yesterday.

In Colombo, hundreds of young Tamils have also been detained by police in their search for the guerrillas responsible for the attack last week on the city's main oil depot.

"This sort of thing makes the Tamil people resent the government," Mr. Sivasithamparam said. "They're not willing to study a political proposal in this environment."

As the military conflict intensifies in Jaffna, with both sides apparently fighting to the death, several Tamil politicians have threatened to pull out of Mrs.

Kumaratunga's parliamentary alliance. Yet as the rebels ignite the rest of the tropical island in terror, she faces an equal, if not greater, backlash from Sinhalese nationalists who want to crush the Tamil separatist movement.

Tamils represent about 18 per cent of Sri Lanka's population of 17 million.

Leaders of the right-wing United National Party, which ruled Sri Lanka until Mrs. Kumaratunga's victory in 1993, already have threatened to vote against her proposed constitutional amendments, which would give the Tamils a semi-autonomous region in the country's north and east. Such amendments need a two-thirds majority in parliament, which the UNP could scupper.

"While power should be devolved, it cannot be devolved to the point of dividing the nation," said Susil Munasinghe, a senior UNP member of parliament.

Mr. Munasinghe said he and most members of the UNP would not support Mrs. Kumaratunga's political package as it stands. But he doubted that the rebels want a political settlement, anyway. "They are too deeply enmeshed in war," he said.

While the government engaged in talks with the rebels last winter, the rebels broke a ceasefire in April and returned to fighting. Mrs. Kumaratunga allowed her military to launch an offensive in July but it failed badly when the front ranks of the invasion force ran out of ammunition.

The military then prepared for a massive autumn offensive, with new equipment and better

tactics, including aircraft to support ground troops, and thus far appears to hold the upper hand. Military sources said the Tamil Tigers on Tuesday executed 29 Jaffna civilians whom they labelled traitors for supporting the government offensive.

By moving thousands of troops to the northern front, however, the military has exposed its flank in eastern and central Sri Lanka, where the rebels have struck against Sinhalese civilians with brutal precision in the past week. And it is now in a race to reach the rebel stronghold of Jaffna town before heavy rains arrive in November, when troop and artillery movement becomes more difficult.

Mr. Munasinghe said the military must shift its tactic. "We're trying to fight a guerrilla war with standard war techniques," he said. "It is like the Americans in Vietnam."

If the military had exposed its flank to sabotage, Mrs. Kumaratunga may have left one of her political flanks unguarded, too. As the rebels step up their terror campaign against Sinhalese villagers, she may soon face the wrath of the influential Buddhist clergy, many of whom disdain the largely Hindu Tamils.

But many Tamils also feel alienated from the country. Sinhalese account for almost all of the nation's police force and armed services personnel, a situation that turns many police encounters into ethnic issues.

Over the past 30 years, several governments have encouraged Sinhalese farmers to move to newly irrigated land in the north-central and eastern provinces, a resettlement program that many Tamils resented.