

Sri Lanka's Buddhist monks are intent on war



Sri Lanka locator

By Mian Ridge in Jaffna

12:01AM BST 17 Jun 2007

In pictures: Sri Lanka's hardline monks

Wearing an orange robe and a serene smile, the Venerable Athuraliye Rathana looks the very embodiment of peace, but when the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk talks of the Tamil Tigers, he sounds more like an army general.

"Day by day we are weakening them militarily," he said, cocking his shaven head thoughtfully to one side. "Talk can come later."

Most Buddhist monks are known for their love of peace, harmony and a philosophical acceptance of fate - but as the bloody war that has ravaged Sri Lanka for 25 years enters a new and terrible phase, Mr Rathana and his fellow hard-line monks are urging the president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, to keep the promise upon which he came to power in late 2005: to crush the Tamil Tigers with military force.

The Tigers are fighting for a separate homeland in the north and east for the Tamils, a mostly Hindu minority which has suffered decades of discrimination from the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. In recent months, the Tigers have stepped up a campaign of terror against both Sinhalese and Tamils, with bombings and the forcible recruitment of child soldiers.

The hard-line monks are at the vanguard of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, which views Tamils as outsiders. In January, they joined the government with their own party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya or National Heritage Party - pushing its narrow, one-seat majority up to nine.

"The nationalists have huge influence on the president," said Jehan Perera, the executive director of the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, a group working for reconciliation. This was evident, he said, in the expulsion earlier this month of 350 Tamils from the capital Colombo, a move human rights groups described as a "pogrom".



The monks have used their new power to argue vociferously against any self-determination for the Tamils in the north, opposing even the more limited measure of autonomy that most observers believe is necessary for peace. Instead they are pushing for the bloody military campaign against the Tigers to be stepped up.

The heavy cost of the war is evident throughout this tear-shaped island, where 70,000 have died since 1983. In the past 18 months, 5,000 have been killed - compared with 200 in the previous three years - shattering a 2002 ceasefire brokered by Norway.

Asked for his views on the need for further peace talks, Mr Rathana said:

"We need conversation - and we need war." The Tamil desire for a homeland is based on a myth, he added. "Sri Lanka was totally a Sinhalese kingdom, and most people accept that."

To people in northern Sri Lanka, which is heavily Tamil and mostly controlled by the Tigers, such talk is hard to stomach. "There is widespread discrimination against Tamils, who want to live as equal citizens with their rights and cultures recognised," said the white-haired Bishop Thomas Savundaranayagam of Jaffna, an outspoken defender of human rights.

The Jaffna peninsula, a lush, green land swarming with Sinhalese soldiers in green fatigues, is the only part of the north controlled by government forces. As the conflict intensifies, the government is tightening its grip on the region and deepening the resentment of ordinary Tamils.

In August, the only road linking Jaffna to the rest of the country was closed, pushing up the costs of food and medical supplies. Without concrete, little is being built and there is practically no investment.

People in Jaffna are also scared. More than 300 civilians have been murdered in the past 18 months; many, it is suspected, by a paramilitary force with close ties to the military intelligence agency.

Two journalists at the popular Uthayan newspaper were killed when masked gunmen burst into its offices on the night of Press Freedom Day in May last year. Seven more survived by hiding in the lavatory. The walls are still studded with bullet holes.

"There are no human rights in Jaffna," said A K Sivasubramaniam, co-ordinator of Sarvodaya, a human rights and development charity. "People are even scared to talk about how there are no human rights."

Most Tamils, said Bishop Savundaranayagam, loathed the bullying violence of the Tigers and their habit of recruiting child soldiers. "But they are sympathetic about what the Tigers are fighting for," he added.

In some cases, this sympathy is turning into support. "There is only one enemy: the government," said a bookish-looking science student at the University of Jaffna, who found death threats pinned to his locker after he protested against the abduction of three school pupils earlier this year. "If this conflict continues, many of my friends will join the Tigers."

The government has also been accused of committing atrocities in eastern Sri Lanka, where civilians with supposed links to the insurgents have been murdered and abducted, and last month Britain withdrew some debt relief to Sri Lanka, citing the government's poor human rights record. But back in Colombo, Mr Rathana remained implacable.

At the mention of the government's supposed involvement in human rights violations, the monk scoffed. "Human rights? The Tigers only launched the human rights campaign to discredit Sri Lanka."

