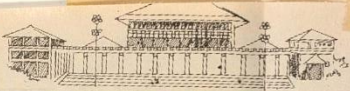


LTTE suspect revealed intention to attack Kolonnawa. (1995, October 22) *The Island*.



POLITICS



Sunday October 22, 1995

LTTE SUSPECT REVEALED INTENTION TO ATTACK KOLONNAWA

By Our Defence Correspondent

In May, an LTTE cadre arrested in Colombo gave a list of several military and economic installations which the Tigers were targeting for destruction.

He also told police of several political and military leaders whom the Tiger high command wanted assassinated.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, and the three service chiefs were among those targeted, and their security was immediately strengthened.

An attempt to assassinate Minister Ratwatte at Independence Square on August 7 failed, and a ring of Tiger spies gathering information on the President was smashed later that month.

As far as the installations targeted for destruction, little could be done except to beef up security. THESE INCLUDED SEVERAL MINISTRIES, THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE ARMY, NAVY AND AIR FORCE, AND Katunayake airport.

This was only partially successful. An attempt to blow up the airport on June 5 misfired due to the explosives in the van not detonating completely.

Among the list of installations given was the oil storage facility at Kolonnawa.

There was little that could be done to protect Kolonnawa, which is in a highly populated area, and can be approached quite easily from any side. However, soldiers and policemen were assigned to guard the facility, in addition to the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation's own security personnel.

In economic terms, the value of the Kolonnawa oil tanks cannot be measured. It contains practically the entire stock of the nation's diesel, petrol, kerosene and liquid petroleum (LP gas).

After being brought in from the Middle East in oil tankers, these precious fuels are pumped through a pipeline to Orugodawatte, then to Sapugaskande and refined, and finally sent to Kolonnawa for storage until it is collected by bowzers and trains

for distribution throughout the island. If all the tanks at Kolonnawa are destroyed, the economy would grind to a halt, at least for a few weeks, until more fuel can be brought in from abroad and refined. Even then, there would be no place to store the refined fuel.

So important is Kolonnawa to Sri Lanka's economy and

north, in which the Tigers were taking heavy casualties.

This week too, the Tigers have been under pressure in the north. Operation Sun Ray has already killed at least 151 Tigers in the Jaffna Peninsula, and wounded at least another 500.

Although the army has only advanced about three kilometers, and lost soldiers, with

Censored
However, the Tiger attack on Friday on Kolonnawa and Orugodawatte, while causing a lot of damage and panic, was largely unsuccessful. Colonel Ratwatte said in parliament on Friday that there would not be a shortage since the Tigers had destroyed only 11 of 49 storage tanks.

serve aviation fuel stocks for the air force, within hours of the attacks the government asked foreign airlines to fill their fuel tanks at the last stop before Colombo, and avoid refueling planes at Katunayake. But according to sources at the Petroleum Corporation, the country has about 30 days' supply of fuel, and an oil tanker loaded with crude oil

after the attack, after the driver of the lorry which transported the explosives to Kolonnawa and Orugodawatte confessed.

The lorry had been stopped by vigilant policemen at a checkpoint on Kotta Road shortly after the attacks. Hidden inside, behind stacks of canned goods, were explosives and a rocket launcher. Two other business-

men were unable to get away from the area before the curfew was clamped down at 5 a.m. on Friday. Police and soldiers are conducting house-to-house searches for them.

The hit team, travelling in the van and the lorry, had gone to the lightly guarded Orugodawatte site first, according to police. Having dropped off several explosives there, the rest proceeded to Kolonnawa, where four of them started climbing a fence to get in.

They were spotted by soldiers and police guarding the site, and a gunbattle ensued. But meanwhile, the rest of the Tigers had got in from another direction, and the soldiers and police had fled. The Tigers had then fixed explosive charges to the oil tanks, which had blown up at 2.05 a.m.

Unhappily, even after more than a decade of war and terror bombings and assassinations in Colombo, there still is no proper procedure followed by the police and armed forces in the capital when such an emergency takes place.

After the oil tanks blew up, army and Special Task Force reinforcements rushed to the area but were unable to identify friend or foe in the darkness. This led to half a dozen confusing gunbattles in the darkness, with separate army and police units firing on each other by mistake.

Unhappily, the army's bomb squad arrived on the scene shortly after the blast, and the waiting Tigers opened fire, killing all three soldiers in the familiar camouflaged pickup truck even before they could get out of the vehicle.

The Tigers had then split up in the neighbourhood, and for several hours, soldiers and policemen hunted for them in the neighbourhood in the darkness.

Meanwhile, the fires were raging out of control, since fire fighters could not get close because of the threat of the Tigers firing on them. Thousands of panicked people fled the area due to the flames, fumes, and the shooting, but thousands more came towards the battle to

see the fires at close hand.

Sadly, an air force platoon which arrived at about 4 a.m. was mistaken for LTTE cadres, and soldiers and policemen opened fire on them.

It is believed that many of the 10 airmen killed that morning were hit by "friendly fire" from the other forces at Kolonnawa.

The BBC's Colombo correspondent, George Arney, was also wounded by a panic-stricken soldier at the same time.

When all the bodies were counted after dawn, 10 airmen, 8 soldiers, and five policemen and STF personnel, and two security guards were dead. Three Tigers were also killed.

The tanks destroyed at the main Kolonnawa storage depot contained diesel and kerosene, while the smaller Orugodawatte tanks contained crude oil.

The loss in oil is estimated to be about Rs. 1 billion, while the destroyed tanks were worth about Rs. 500 million.

On Friday night, an Indian team which specializes in fighting oil fires arrived in Colombo, and although the fires were still raging on Saturday morning, when this column was written, authorities were confident that the fires would be put out over the weekend or early next week, once stocks of foam used for oil fires arrives from India.

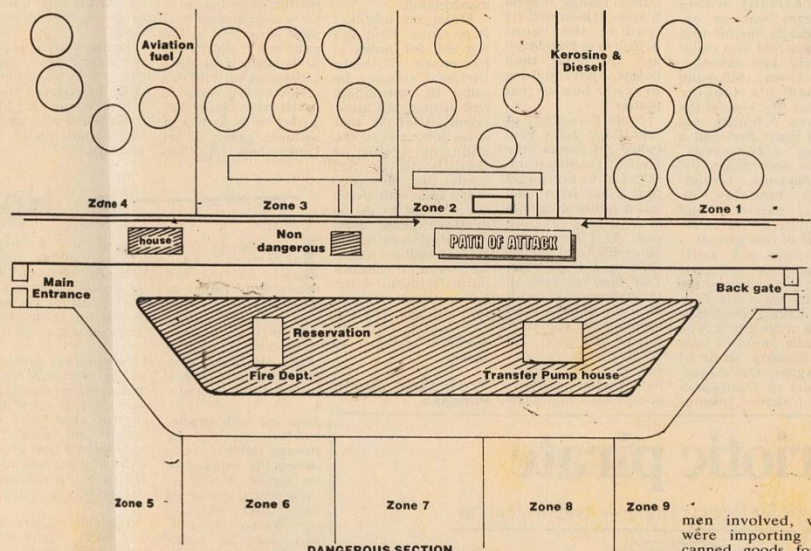
Meanwhile, the environmental hazards to area residents has only been begun to be calculated. Apart from coughs and lung irritations, which will affect children and old people most, oily black rain is falling in the area east of the fires, in which direction the wind is blowing.

The greatest danger is that the oil will get into the water tables and the Kelani river, from which 90 percent of Colombo's water is pumped through the Ambatale station.

Since the water board's purification plants are not capable of purifying water contaminated with oil, this raises the frightening possibility of a water shortage in the city.

However, all this depends on how long the fires rage, which is yet to be seen.

The Kolonnawa Complex



military, that when the Japanese bombed Colombo in April of 1942, a large number of bombers were assigned to destroy the Kolonnawa oil tanks. They failed in their mission that day, some of the bombs hitting the Angoda mental hospital instead.

It is a well known fact that whenever the Tigers are under pressure from the armed forces in the north, they choose to bomb military or economic targets in Colombo.

The 1991 J.O.C. bomb, the murder of state minister for defence Ranjan Wijeratne, the assassination of navy chief Admiral Clancy Fernando, etc., are all examples of the Tigers striking in Colombo while they were under pressure in the north. In each case, there was an operation going on in the

wounded, the LTTE is feeling the pressure of the troops' slow advance towards Jaffna town.

By striking at Kolonnawa, the Tigers hoped to destroy the country's oil reserves, including diesel, without which the army's tanks, and trucks, and the navy's gunboats and supply ships cannot run.

Without aviation fuel, the air force would be unable to airlift wounded from Palali to Colombo, let alone provide gunfire and bombing support to ground troops.

Col. Ratwatte vowed that "the offensive would not stop until we destroy the LTTE and liberate the Tamil people."

All indications are that Operation Sun Ray is still going ahead.

In military terms, Friday's LTTE attacks have been unsuccessful since the offensive has not been immediately affected.

However, there is likely to be at least a slight shortage of fuel within the next few weeks, caused mainly by panic buying, which will mainly affect the public.

It remains to be seen if the shortage will affect the operation. However, it is likely that it will not, since the government has already taken steps to ensure a steady supply of fuel to the forces in the Jaffna Peninsula.

is currently in the Colombo port waiting to unload.

This means that there is more than enough fuel in the country, and certainly sufficient stocks to last until the monsoon.

Although the oil tanker has had to suspend unloading due to the attack on Orugodawatte, where the crude oil's usually stored, the Petroleum Corporation is examining the possibility of using the unused Trincomalee oil tank farm.

The operation by the police and army in Colombo to round up the LTTE ring which masterminded the attacks has scored considerable success already.

The Tamil businessman who lives down Kotta Road in Borella, who organized the hit vehicles for the hit shelter for them, was arrested within hours

men involved, who were importing the canned goods found in the lorry, have already been arrested.

Police are still hunting for 12 members of the hit squad who are still at large. According to a list obtained from the Kotta Road businessman, there were 19 on the hit team.

One of them was a suicide bomber who blew himself up at the Kolonnawa installation. Two others were shot by police and soldiers, one of them at Orugodawatte.

Four others have been captured and are under interrogation.

Some of the 12 surviving members are believed to have escaped in a white Hiace van bearing the number plate 62-1176. They are believed to have either escaped out of the city, or are hiding in another safe house in Colombo.

However, a few of the Tigers may still be hiding in the Kolonnawa and Orugodawatte areas, having

Censored
Censored