

Rana Ghosha V

# Debacle at Periyamadhu

By our Defence Correspondent.

Sri Lanka's army doesn't like bulges in its lines of defence.

And this makes it very predictable. In the last decade, almost every thrust forward has been followed by an operation to smoothen out bulges in the defence line of the newly captured area. This follows a military theory popular in World War I, that a bulge is dangerous because the enemy can easily use it as a launching pad for attacks into our territory.

Rana Ghosha IV which took place two months ago, captured a large area of the western Wannu jungle, but left a bulge in the defence line near the town of Periyamadhu.

Rana Ghosha V was supposed to flatten the Periyamadhu bulge.

And the Tigers were waiting. Sunday, September 12, was supposed to be the start of the operation. It turned out to be the end of it as well.

The operation began with a massive pre-dawn bombardment by artillery, and mortars. Then, as the sun rose, Kfir jets and MI-24 helicopter gunships swooped in, bombing and strafing known LTTE defensive positions with 250-kg bombs, rockets, and machine gun fire.

Then units of the 53rd and 55th Divisions, the best that the army has to offer, went forward on two flanks, towards the town of Periyamadhu, which is a junction of several jungle roads.

But they walked into a hail of deadly accurate LTTE mortar fire. Within a few hours, more than 50 soldiers were dead, and hundreds wounded, almost all by mortar shells.

By noon, the order was given to retreat back to the original positions.

At around this time, one group of 15 soldiers became encircled by LTTE cadres, and was totally annihilated. The Tigers handed over the bodies through the ICRC on Wednesday.

By dusk, operation Rana Ghosha V was over.

A total of 87 soldiers were killed, and 592 wounded. Of the wounded, only 214 were serious enough to be classed as P1, which is the army's definition of soldiers who won't be fit for duty for at least six months.

Since the army retreated quickly, there was

no sure way to count the enemy's casualties. Intercepts of Tiger radio transmissions indicate that about 70-100 cadres were killed, mostly by artillery and mortar fire and by the Air Force sorties.

But the operation achieved nothing. The Periyamadhu bulge remains as it was.

The only gain was in the dead, if one can count that as a gain. It will be months before the army is ready to launch an operation with

these two divisions again. By then, the Northeast Monsoon will be in full swing, restricting movements in the jungle to a crawl. When the rains cease in late January, the army should be ready for more battles. But by then the Tigers would have licked their wounds clean as well.

Since the premature end of the forlorn operation Jaya Sikurui a year ago, the army has switched its attention solely to the western half of the Wannu, conducting the series of operations there known as Rana Ghosha. Their aim was to advance northwards and capture territory from the LTTE.

For how long the war will go on like this is anybody's guess. We believe it is worth reproducing below, parts of this column's views last Sunday, written before Rana Ghosha V. Our readers would have been digesting this when the Periyamadhu debacle was on, and soldiers were being needlessly sacrificed far away, in a wrong military strategy.

"At the snail's pace that the army's crack divisions have been advancing this year, our grandchildren will be fighting this war! Is the government serious about finishing

off the war? Or are top politicians and generals making so much money from arms deals that the government has deliberately adopted a policy of dragging out the fighting for as long as it can?"

Disturbing as this sounds to anyone, the question must be asked in light of the amazingly slow advance of the army into the Wannu region, over the last ten months....

In the Mannar district, a large land area has

will soon be upon us, turning the battlezones into a sea of mud' from November to January. This means that major operations must take place during the other nine months of the year. But with the army stopping for months between large operations, even this precious time is wasted."

Curiously, despite the huge amount of money that has been poured into the defence budget for the last four years, the army's major

**After months of inaction, the army's crack divisions went forward into a rain of mortar fire. Half a day later they were back where they started, with 87 soldiers killed, and 592 wounded. The only consolation is that LTTE casualties were just as high.**

**But in one day, the aborted operation sapped both sides of the strength for operations for at least two months. With monsoon rains due shortly, this means that there probably won't be any more major operations until February.**

been gained, north of the Mannar — Medawachchiya road. But this consists entirely of jungle and rice fields, with a few villages here and there. No major towns have been captured there, simply because there aren't any major towns there! ..

The advance in the Mannar district, could have a lot of strategic significance, except for the fact that the army has sat back and resided for months in between operations. The Mannar operations have therefore done little to raise hopes that the army is anywhere near defeating the LTTE for good.

Sixteen years is an extremely long time for a war to go on. Few wars in world history have been much longer. Either the government and the army don't have any strategy to win, or some people in key positions don't want it all to end.

The need for urgency in action is made all the more vital, because the Northeast monsoon

units remain strangely slow to move around. Our generals prefer to set up the troops, tanks, artillery, munitions, etc. for an operation first, taking months to do so, as if they were setting up the pieces on a draughts board.

This allows the LTTE time to prepare defences. Then, when the battle begins, it is just like a game of draughts, with the army trying to annihilate the LTTE through brute force.

It would seem logical that, given the diminished size of the LTTE, the army would switch operations from one part of the north to another, so that the Tigers are unable to defend. This strategy has worked perfectly on many occasions. In fact, each time the army has advanced simultaneously on two or more fronts at the same time, the LTTE has been unable to defend, being thrown into confusion as to where the main threat is coming from.

With the army having carried out half a dozen operations north of the Mannar — Medawachchiya Road since March of this year, the LTTE has concentrated almost all of its forces there. So it would have been logical to switch the next operation to another part of

the Wannu, to catch the Tigers off guard.

But instead, the generals chose to blunder straight on, like the famous 'Charge of the Light Brigade'.

Of course, moving your point of attack to another area takes a lot of work. Troops must be moved, along with field hospitals, logistics, field kitchens, armories, etc. Tanks, artillery batteries and mortar units must move, taking with them thousands of shells.

But the fact is that the LTTE must do the same, to counter the threat from the new direction. And it isn't any easier for them, than it is for the army. They just seem to be quicker in getting things done, than our generals.

An attack last Sunday, on LTTE positions near Oddusudan, Paranthan, or even across the Jaffna Lagoon into Pooneryn, would have met little resistance for several days, until the Tigers had time to bring their forces around.

Belatedly, an operation was launched on Tuesday at Paranthan. But this was a limited one that was intended to save face for the generals, rather than achieve any proper target.

Named operation Rala Pahara, it began with MI-24 helicopters strafing LTTE positions east of Paranthan. A short time later, with the Tigers occupied to the east, a unit of commandos, together with battle tanks, advanced westwards from Paranthan.

The advance took the Tigers by surprise, and it is believed that 11 of them were killed, with another 28 wounded. A series of LTTE bunkers in the area were destroyed.

The commandos didn't suffer any casualties, but had two tanks badly damaged.

A smaller operation on the same day was carried out at Oddusudan, where a strong group of soldiers went out ahead of the defence lines, and killed five women cadres, before returning.

As we said last Sunday, there doesn't seem to be a strategy aimed at winning the war. Instead, our generals carry out one small operation after another, gaining a little territory at the cost of a huge number of dead and wounded. Many times, like last Sunday, there is no ground gained at all.

It's like a boxing match where one can go for a knockout in the first few rounds, or go for a win over 12 rounds.

Except that the 12 rounds have already taken 17 years. And counting.

