

LTTE now seems set to stall advance by Security Forces. (1999, September 19). *The Sunday times.*

# LTTE now seems set to stall advance by Security Forces

It is not always that the Directorate of Internal Intelligence (DII) can make a totally accurate prediction of things to come.

But this time, they were near accurate. In a report on LTTE activities for the week ending August 18, DII said: "The LTTE is determined to stall any further advance of SF (Security Forces) personnel, engaged in SF operation, 'Rana Gosa,' around Viduthalthivu and Pallamadu areas in Mannar. Around 150 armed cadres under Selvaraj have infiltrated into Pappamodai areas in order to launch a pre-emptive attack on defence positions around Pappamodai and Viduthalthivu areas."

Even if the warning was a month old, there was no pre-emptive attack. Yet, the DII had made a strong point when it said "The LTTE is determined to stall any further advances of security forces in Operation Rana Gosa."

The DII prophecy came right. Tiger guerrillas stalled efforts by the security forces to advance northwards from the Wannu during Phase Five of 'Operation Rana Gosa.' (Battle Cry) Troops from the Army's 53 Division broke out from their defences, far west of the Periyamadu tank before crack of dawn on Sunday, September 12. They smashed their way through, destroying LTTE bunkers and firing at guerrilla positions. The men who fought with great courage and determination pushed forward up to some two kilometres. It was here they began to meet stiff guerrilla resistance. Tiger cadres fired 120 mm and 81 mm mortars. Also fired liberally were rounds from Multi Barrel Rocket Launch-

Bohran. The advances of the two Army Divisions, one from the east and the other from the west of Periyamadu tank, were from locations southwards from the village of Periyamadu, an area dominated by the LTTE. The security forces defences are located south of this village.

Details emerging from the stalled offensive reveal that the thrust of the two Divisions was to make a pincer movement northwards to encircle the Periyamadu village by linking up at a point far north of it. If successful, that would have brought under security forces control a sizeable civilian population under whose cover Tiger cadres are operating.

As Phase Five of 'Operation Rana Gosa' ended abruptly, the Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence on September 12 placed the death toll at 53 security forces personnel killed and 92 seriously wounded. A further 319 soldiers had received minor injuries. The MOD also said 116 Tiger cadres were killed. However, the LTTE claimed in a news release from London that 27 of its cadres including 12 women had been killed. Other authoritative official quarters, however, had a different set of very much higher figures, both for the security forces. They also said Tiger guerrilla casualties were higher than those officially claimed. But they cannot be revealed in view of the ongoing 15 month long censorship.

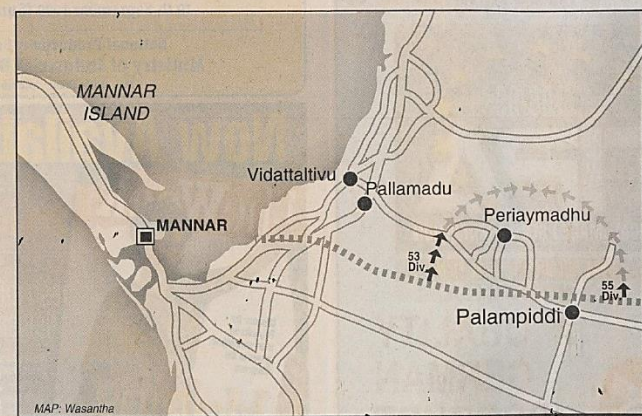
Military sources said equipment losses included 45 T56(2) assault rifles, 11 T-56 (1) assault rifles, 11 RPGs, 1 PKMG, 10 claymore mines and 40,000 rounds of ammunition.

Jaya Sikuru' and led to unprecedented casualties. Has that been repeated during 'Operation Rana Gosa 5'?

The operation itself has been planned barely days before Major General Wasantha Perera, moved to Vavuniya on August 27 to act for the SF Commander, Wannu, Major General Lionel Balagalle. The latter was on an official engagement in Hawaii, United States. Upon his return to Colombo, Maj. Gen. Balagalle relinquished duties as SF Commander, Wannu, on September 12 at a handing over ceremony in Vavuniya - the same day 'Operation Rana Gosa 5' was launched. He now functions in his substantive post as Chief of Staff of the Army.

It has now become clear Maj. Gen. Perera put together the mechanics of 'Operation Rana Gosa 5' in just two weeks. The fact that such a move did not come on his own volition, though he agreed, is quite clear. Who then wanted to rush through what has now turned out to be a hazardous operation sacrificing the lives and limbs of the dedicated soldiers?

Needless to say the outcome of 'Operation Rana Gosa 5' caused both confusion and concern in the security establishment in Colombo. Some of those in the top rungs were completely in the dark about what was going on and did not even have access to the exact casualty counts. They were being revealed on a 'need to know basis.' One senior officer could only give a very sketchy account when a Cabinet Minister inquired after what was going on. 'Is this how you fight the war?', he asked in what appeared to be light hearted banter. But there was no doubt he was making a



MAP: Wasantha

took on eight assigned targets. In one attack, five guerrillas were killed. In another, they fired at two guerrillas who were readying an ack ack gun killing both. The troops advanced three kilometres when a tank was hit by a Rocket Propelled Grenade. Another tank fell into a ditch and had to be retrieved by a recovery vehicle.

Troops from the 544 Brigade broke out from the western defences at Paranthan to advance in the direction of Pooneryn. They had proceeded some one and half kilometres when a moving Double Cab was spotted. Troops ahead called for artillery fire. They later reported seeing three bodies being blown skywards though the Double Cab moved away. Eleven guerrillas were killed in both encounters and 30

the Constable were shot dead. The Jeep was also set on fire. On the same day, security forces discovered a can containing 30 kilograms of explosives along Lower Ors Hill Road which leads to the Army's 22 Division headquarters.

On Thursday, at Thatchinamaruthumadam in security forces controlled Wannu, a Claymore mine exploded killing ten soldiers on the spot. Another died upon admission to hospital and over 20 were wounded. The incident occurred when the explosion hit a vehicle in which the soldiers were travelling.

After a break of more than ten months, this is the first time this year that the LTTE assumed a conventional posture to oppose the advance of security forces. Since the launch of 'Operation Jaya Sikuru' in May 1997, for 18

areas and continuing with attacks on easy economic targets like power transformers. A significant feature of the recent conventional role has been the avoidance of direct contact with the security forces during 'Operation Rana Gosa 5.' This is the first time this tactic of using Stand Off weapons has been resorted to extensively with the use of 120mm/81mm mortars, Multi Barrel Rocket launchers (MBRLs) and 122 mm artillery. Making this much more significant is the fact that the LTTE has recently acquired the MBRLs. Intelligence sources say that in addition to the 122 mm artillery they seized from the security forces, the LTTE had acquired an unknown number of these weapons.

More importantly, these sources say, they have been able to tunnel in fresh

Some of the equipment purchased earlier was found to be ineffective for which the procurement procedure did come under unsavoury comment.

However that may be, the situation is, as some military sources have commented, that the Army's capability to locate enemy artillery fire is inadequate. For that reason effective counter measures fall short of what is desired to adequately support ground operations as Rana Gosa 5 has demonstrated. If so, that such a situation should prevail, despite the hindsight of operational experience and having knowledge of improved stand off capability by the LTTE, is an indictment on defence planning.

It is speculative whether Rana Gosa 5 was a mili-

The Jungle Telegraph  
By Alia

## Escapes accident

Military top brass are making discreet inquiries about a senior officer who reportedly escaped an accident in the south when a motorist rushed towards the middle of the road from a lane.

The move follows a complaint to the big boss that the security detail assigned to the officer assaulted the motorist and wrenched off a side mirror from his vehicle. The complaint is learnt to have come within minutes of the incident from an eye witness. He made a hurried telephone call.

## Man spotted

Even the intelligence sleuths were carried away by the story that floated around about a Chief Inspector of Police, who escaped a Tiger suicide squad, had successfully obtained asylum down under.

If they reported the matter to their top brass, they discovered that the story has been deliberately floated around to put off the prowling Tigers, the two legged variety.

The story came to light when the man, who was known to be in hiding, was spotted by an intelligence sleuth.

## Tiger posters

Who was responsible or posters that have surfaced in some parts of the Batticaloa district including Cheddipalam, Kalwanchikudy and even the town areas?

Police suspect the LTTE. The posters claim that the LTTE will dominate the Batticaloa district within six months

stiff guerrilla resistance. Tiger cadres fired 120 mm and 81 mm mortars. Also fired liberally were rounds from Multi-Buried Rocket Launchers (MBRLs) and 122 mm Artillery guns.

'They came down like heavy torrents of rain,' a young officer of the 53 Division involved in the advance declared. 'It was so intense, troops had to disperse to take cover. They were hit by the falling mortars,' said the officer, who did not wish to be identified for obvious reasons.

In the ensuing melee, an advancing column had accidentally dropped a secure Cougar communication set. A Captain braved the odds in a bid to prevent this valuable piece of encrypted communications equipment from falling into enemy hands. That would help the enemy listen to radio conversations which cannot be intercepted. Four soldiers moved ahead to provide cover. They fought hard but were cut off from their colleagues. The set was lost and their fate is now not known. All five have been declared Missing In Action (MIA).

When advancing troops reported back to their field headquarters about the increasing mortar casualties, senior commanders decided to order them to fall back to their original positions. By noon, troops had made a tactical withdrawal to the defence lines from which they broke out. The 53 Division is under the charge of Major General Sisira Wijesuriya.

Also before crack of dawn, on Sunday, August 12, troops of the Army's 55 Division broke out from their defences far east of the Periyamadu tank to advance northwards. They had moved barely half a kilometre, when this column too met with stiff resistance. They also came under very heavy 120 mm and 81 mm mortar fire in addition to heavy MBRL and 122 mm artillery barrages. Troops tried hard to break through, both on the first and the second day. They were later compelled to make a tactical withdrawal to their original defensive positions. The 55 Division is under the command of Brigadier T.M.

T56(2) assault rifles, 11 1-26 (1) assault rifles, 11 RPGs, 1 PKMG, 10 claymore mines and 40,000 rounds of ammunition. Introduced on June 5, 1998, the censorship continues. Unlike on all previous occasions, however, the media has been called upon to be their own censors in adhering to regulations in force. Last week, in the aftermath of 'Operation Rana Gosa 5', officials connected with the enforcement of the censorship reminded media personnel of the legal provisions in force.

It seemed a strange coincidence that all major drawbacks for the security forces in the ongoing separatist war has come during periods when a censorship has been in force. That includes the debacle at Paranthan-Kilinochchi on September 27, 1998, where the LTTE launched a counter attack at Mankulam on troops deployed in 'Operation Jaya Sikuru' (Victory Assured). Another was the attack on the Mullaitivu Military Base on July 18, 1996. The story of these two major debacles have not yet been told due to the censorship.

In addition to the ongoing censorship, media visits to Wanni remain banned by the Ministry of Defence on grounds of what it calls 'operational reasons'. The Ministry has declared that the only visits for the media should be those arranged by the military, or in other words, conducted tours. Those making individual requests have been told they could only join such tours.

How did the LTTE resist the latest thrust of the security forces during 'Operation Rana Gosa 5'? Did they monitor vehicle and troop movements in the days prior to the operation or did they have any prior information? Did political compulsions for a 'quick fix' force military planners to ignore intelligence warnings and other ground realities? Was it another case of military men not being able to use their expertise and knowledge, like during previous debacles, due to political arm twisting?

Political interference by passing accepted military norms and procedures was a hallmark during 'Operation

going on. 'Is this now you fight the war?', he asked in what appeared to be light hearted banter. But there was no doubt he was making a strong point.

The events portended to be the main subject at last Tuesday's meeting of the National Security Council. The session scheduled for the morning was re-fixed for the evening. Deputy Defence Minister, Anuruddha Ratwatte, the three service chiefs and the Inspector General of Police, flew to Wanni to obtain a clearer picture of the events during the latest military offensive. He was to later brief

seeing three bodies being blown skywards though the Double Cab moved away. Eleven guerrillas were killed in both encounters and 30 more were wounded. Security forces lost one soldier due to mortar fire and 11 more were wounded, two of them seriously. Troops from the two Brigades returned to their buses the same afternoon.

Whilst resisting the security forces thrust, the LTTE were also flexing their muscles in several other areas last week. On Sunday night (September 12), Tiger guerrillas attacked the Tekkewatte Bus Depot in Vavuniya killing one soldier.

## SITUATION REPORT



BY IQBAL ATHAS

the NSC. Minister Ratwatte flew again yesterday with his entourage to Vavuniya and later to Amparai to visit 31 Colony - the scene of the latest LTTE massacre.

Even before Minister Ratwatte and his entourage took off from Colombo last Tuesday, troops from the Army's 54 Division had launched a retaliatory strike - 'Operation Rela Pahara' (Waves Strike). As the name implied, groups of soldiers took on LTTE targets east and west of Paranthan in a swift manner that surprised the guerrillas. Overseeing the operation was GOC of the 54 Division, Major General Sarath Munasinghe.

At dawn last Tuesday, troops from 543 Brigade broke out of the eastern defences of Paranthan. Some 'crawled ahead in the vast open terrain to avoid detection. Commandos followed in troop carriers which were accompanied by battle tanks. Sri Lanka Air Force Mi-24 helicopters joined in the fray and

Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) placed inside parked buses were defused by security forces the next day.

Just an hour after Monday, September 13, had dawned, a group of over 100 guerrillas led by Paduman and Sudaharan, attacked the Safinagar Police Post in Matur killing two policemen and injuring 11 more. The Post was under the charge of a Reserve Sub-Inspector and had a strength of 46 policemen. A soldier from an Army team that rushed to the area the next morning lost his leg after stepping on a Jomni mine. This improvised mine is named after a dead Tiger guerrilla cadre.

On Wednesday night, a Police Inspector, a Police Driver, a Sergeant and a Constable attached to the Kinnya Police post had been on patrol. At a point opposite Al Hital College, they were ambushed and fired upon. The Inspector and the driver had escaped from the area but the Sergeant and

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acquired an unknown number of these weapons.

More importantly, these sources say, they have been able to smuggle in fresh stocks of 120 and 81 mm mortar rounds as well as rounds from MBRLs and 120 mm artillery.

'The fact that they have been able to replenish their stocks despite all the so called surveillance in the Indian Ocean shows their life lines are still very much intact', a senior intelligence official said. 'As long as this continues, they will not have difficulty sustaining this high intensity war, this time by using Stand Off weapons to supplement for their depleting cadres who are not very easy to replace,' he warned.

He added that the ferocity with which the weapons used to stall 'Operation Rana Gosa 5' had been fired confirms reports the LTTE had managed to smuggle in large quantities of military hardware in the past months. 'For mortars to fall like pelting rain, they must have huge stocks.'

These cannot be made in the Wanni. So how did they come,' he asked. The claim naturally focuses on LTTE smuggling activity in the international waters off the east coast in the past many months.

The fact that the LTTE were acquiring stand off weapons was known for some time. It was also known by experience that the LTTE tactics in defence heavily relied on the use of mortars.

In fact, a large percentage of military casualties have been the result of mortar-artillery fire. Yet the Army's capability for counter bombardment measures have not been commensurate with the growing LTTE stand off mortar-artillery capability. The failure of Rana Gosa 5 also was reportedly to a great extent due to the intensity of LTTE stand off mortar-artillery fire which the Army were unable to neutralise either by counter bombardment by ground forces or by air support.

The Army has had unpleasant experiences earlier with the procurement of mortar locating devices.

by the LTTE, is an indictment on defence planning.

It is speculative whether Rana Gosa 5 was a military necessity or a 'Quick Fire' political expediency. Vidathalivu junction is a nodal point in the North-South road axis from Pooneryn to Mannar as well as on the road axis Eastwards to Madhu and beyond to the A-9 highway to Jaffna. The junction also controls Vidathalivu village, which has for years been a LTTE stronghold.

This village provides sheltered access to the Gulf Straits from where it is only a little over half hour run to India by high powered boats and access to Indian territorial waters a matter of minutes. For these reasons, the Vidathalivu area is of importance both politically and militarily to the Government as well as to the LTTE. Hence, the Army should have expected heavy resistance unlike in the previous Rana Gosa operations.

Whether the timing of the operation on the verge of the break of the monsoon was militarily judicious is another matter bearing in mind that approach to the area from the South is more or less restricted to a single road. Cross-country movement during the monsoons being difficult as the terrain gets boggy.

In the other hand, the capture of Periyamadu village, would have been something to crow about politically. With the monsoons due to break at any time, it is unlikely that the Government could score any major successes before February - May next year, which is almost on election time.

Weighing all aspects, it is more than conjecture that a quick military victory would have been politically more desirable. Now that Rana Gosa 5 has failed it is now back to 'bunkers' both militarily and politically with damage control taking priority. In that exercise, there will be no political fall out for sure.

Police suspect the LTTE. The posters claim that the LTTE will dominate the Batticaloa district within six months by introducing their 'own administration.'

The posters praised the virtues of LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran.

### Not ghosts

They were not ghosts though they were spotted in black military clothes in a cemetery in Mamaduwa, south of Medawachchiya.

The six armed cadres, police have found, were Tiger guerrillas tasked to attack a Deputy Minister in the Wanni district.

He has now been warned not to take the route past the cemetery when he makes his regular visits.

### No response

It is not only media personnel who are debarrued from visiting operational areas in the Wanni except on conducted tours. It seems to cover even parliamentarians.

Opposition MP, Dr. Jayalath Jayawardene, sought permission from the Presidential Secretariat to visit Wanni. Of course he also wanted to cross the recently established Civilian Security Zone (CSZ) to the unsecured areas to 'see the problems faced by the people.'

The Secretariat has referred the request to the Ministry of Defence for a ruling. Weeks have gone by but Dr. Jayawardene says he has still had no response.

### Freezer

That seems his way of helping the man in uniform.

The food supplier who regularly sent the man his quota of rice, chicken, fish and vegetables had a complaint.

Some of the meat was going stale. So he let him have a freezer!