

The assault on Pooneryn and LTTE's eastern strategy. (1993, November 21). *The Island*.

Pooneryn postmortem

The assault on Pooneryn and LTTE's Eastern Strategy

In the history of the Eelam War, the LTTE's lightning assault on Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn base complex of the Sri Lanka navy and the army stands out in many ways. This is the first time such a large force has been concentrated on a military installation, and both the government and the LTTE losses have been remarkably heavy. In the past, whether in handling explosives or Black Tiger operations, the LTTE has learnt their lessons from their own trial and error methods. As much as the LTTE claim that politically they are a product of their historical experience, on Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn base complex assault confirm that they have learnt from all the major battles they have fought in the past.

What was the objective of LTTE attacking this highly fortified base complex? Attacking a fortified installation is always marked with heavy casualties and the LTTE was prepared to bear that loss. Why? A post mortem of the Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn attack demonstrates that as much as the Sri Lankan forces suf-

fered, the LTTE too suffered. The LTTE lost more than 1/5th its northern based fighting cadres in the attack, including some of its best leaders. This amounts to 700-800 dead and 1,400 injured. Of the injured about 50% will never return to the battlefield again.

Psyche

To answer this question one must examine the psyche of the LTTE leadership. Since the origin of the Tigers in 1974 Prabhakaran has always taken the initiative in battle. Before the enemy strikes he strikes. Whether this is an individual or a group his perception has not changed. Prabhakaran had made his commanders realise that the Sri Lanka army will launch a massive assault in the Jaffna peninsula in February-March next year after the monsoon subsides.

The assault on Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn was a part of their grand plan to thwart that offensive. Their plan was to weaken and dislodge the enemy which had gained a foothold in the lagoon and to raid their valuable arms and

ammunition dumps. By holding Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn complex, the army and the navy was preventing the easy Sanggiddy ferry operation which was essential both for the civilians and their cadres to cross the lagoon.

The LTTE design stems from the importance of holding the peninsula. If Jaffna falls, the LTTE has no options but to retreat to the Wann and the Mulaiwattuwan (Weli Oya-Manal Aru area), where they can revert to guerrilla warfare and exist for a longer period as long as the supplies reach them. However, abandoning Jaffna would have very serious implications for the LTTE.

Logistically, the supplies will come almost to a halt because they will be deprived of living among a people who supports them or a people still wealthy enough for them to generate wealth by means of taxes and armed appropriations. Politically, the image of the LTTE will be shattered, both nationally and internationally, for having retreated from Jaffna — the heartland of the Tamils.

Prabhakaran does not

want to fail. Despite heavy losses of storming a well-fortified camp, the ordered Anbu, the former Special District Commander of the Weli Oya to action. Anbu, held the rank of Deputy Special Commander of LTTE's Jaffna command during the time of the assault. The title "special" means "Visheda," only given to those men who have proven themselves in battle and in command.

Assault team

Of the 1800-2000 strong pre-dawn assault team nearly 900 cadres were from the Batticaloa/Ampara districts. To defend Jaffna, the LTTE had inducted 1200 cadres to Jaffna under Karuna, the special District Commander of the Batticaloa/Ampara districts, in February and March this year. In fact, when the eastern cadres left for the north, a few hundreds deserted stating that serving in their locale is different from going to the north to defend another area.

These 900 were mostly from the men Karuna brought with him or eastern cadres who had been inducted to LTTE's northern units in 1991 and 1992. In the

Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn battle the largest number of cadres killed and injured were eastern cadres. The casualty rate is estimated to be over 30%. Of the injured half that number will not fight again. The Batticaloa/Ampara cadres known as "Ana" group was supported by cadres from Wann, Jaffna, Trincomalee, Weli Oya and Mannar cadres. The Wann and Jaffna groups suffered about 75 deaths each, the Trincomalee, Weli Oya and the Mannar groups suffered about 20-25 each.

Other than these groups from LTTE six district commands, the LTTE had inducted five brigades to the battle field. They were members of the Charles Anthony Brigade where 35 men died, the intelligence group known as the "Ayanna" brigade where 26 died, the Special forces group where 57 died and the women's brigade where 53 died. The losses among the elite Special Force Group of the LTTE also known as the Zero group or the "Saiwar" group and the Black Sea Tiger group has dented the organisation.

The LTTE lost three of their best Special Forces

men. They were Major Ilangovan, Major Michael and Major Kumaran. The LTTE also lost 6 captains and 14 2nd Lt and Lt from this elite brigade. The LTTE had also deployed cadres from the Zero Zero station at Pully where they maintain a computer station, maintain records.

Of this unit they lost over 10 men. In addition to the Charles Anthony Brigade named after a dead LTTE fighter, there is reliable information that a new brigade named after a less known cadre also took part in the attack.

Major blow

The LTTE also inflicted a very heavy loss when 34 Black Sea Tigers including Major Padma, the Deputy Commander of the Women Black Sea Tigers, was killed along with Major Ganesh and Major Gobi who performed suicide attacks. This has been the single major blow to the LTTE's Black Sea Tiger fleet. Among the middle level leadership of the Black Sea Tigers killed in this attack were Lt Katpagan, 2nd Lt Kavarasan, 2nd Lt Elumalai and 2nd Lt Vivekan. The Nagathevanthurai-

Pooneryn assault confirms that the LTTE has suffered tremendously. The assault was in waves and continued for 3 days. The initial wave was highly dramatic where two massive assaulting teams, one by sea in boats and the other by land simultaneously confronted the northern military high command headed by Generals Denzil Kobbe-kaduwa and Vijaya Wimalaratne only 24 hours before they launched Operation Count Down (according to some) — a strike from Araly, west of Jaffna town using commandos and special forces and capture the peninsula to be linked up by troops simultaneously

overrun the Pooneryn camp. The LTTE, despite such a setback will do its best — by similar lightning strikes in the north and by Black Tiger Operations in the south — to thwart the impending assault on the peninsula.

It should be recalled how the LTTE eliminated the northern military high command headed by Generals Denzil Kobbe-kaduwa and Vijaya Wimalaratne only 24 hours before they launched Operation Count Down (according to some) — a strike from Araly, west of Jaffna town using commandos and special forces and capture the peninsula to be linked up by troops simultaneously

by Ravana

complex. The refuels included night training.

The LTTE plan of weakening the Sri Lankan forces before they launch their highly advertised assault on the peninsula was not all that successful for two reasons. Despite heavy losses on both sides — over 600 Sri Lankan troops died — the LTTE could not complete

assaulting from Palali.

Another major reason the LTTE timed their assault on Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn was to facilitate the Sanggiddy passage as Kilali had become unsafe and vulnerable after 'Operation Yal Devi' LTTE's static defence to secure the Kilali passage were destroyed during

'Yal Devi'. Had the infrastructure remained the attack on the Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn base complex would have been more adverse.

Further, the LTTE needed to replenish the ammunition and the mortars expended countering Operation Yal Devi. Today, the supply routes as well as quantities the LTTE receive are limited. Internationally, the collections made has become meagre after the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. As stated in last week's column, the LTTE has to depend more and more on the "capture supply" because the Indian navy has sealed off 70% of LTTE's supply. Today, the Indian authorities are doing their best even to prevent the 30% from reaching the LTTE by deploying their vessels in the international waters and trying to track down LTTE ships.

Preemptive

Another governing reason why the LTTE attacked the Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn base was the fact that the LTTE had realised that in conven-

tional warfare — face to face combat — whether it was Jayashakthi (Fort), Balavegaya (Elephant Pass), Akunu Pahara (Weli Oya), Haya Pahara (Weli Oya), or the recent Yal Devi (Kilali), the LTTE losses are more. This was because the army was superior in conventional warfare particularly because they had the advantage of heavy fire power.

Realising that there will be another Operation Yal Devi type of assault on the peninsula, the LTTE took advantage of "the initiative" in battle and attacked the Nagathevanthurai-Pooneryn camp. The success of N-P was not to be celebrated for the LTTE except for the valuable weapons they recovered, because it was not a cakewalk for them like the Janakapura attack. The army continued to resist the advancing enemy killing as many LTTE cadres as possible while incurring losses. In the attack 14 navy officers, comprising 8 lieutenants and 6 sub-lieutenants died fighting. Among the army officers who died fighting were Major U. Hemapala, Captain K. C. P. Wickramaratna, Captain Pandurata Wanasinghe,

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