

Government gives up hope for military solution before polls. (1999, September 26). *The Island*.

Government gives up hope for military solution before polls

by our Defence Correspondent

The government has privately conceded that there is no possibility of ending the war through military means before the General Elections next August, sources in the Cabinet said.

This comes in the wake of the defeat of "operation Rana Ghosha V" two weeks ago, which was meant to capture a large swathe of LTTE controlled territory, but ended up where it started, with the loss of 87 soldiers killed and nearly 700 wounded.

President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga summoned a top level meeting of several Cabinet Ministers, Defence Ministry officials, and army generals, at Temple Trees last week, to discuss the impact of the defeat of Rana Ghosha V, sources said.

The president had plainly wanted to know when the next major operation could be launched, and how much more LTTE territory the army could recapture within the next nine months. Campaigning for the General Election will start at about that time.

The generals, who included the top brass of operation Rana Ghosha, The Joint operations Bureau chief General Rohan Daluwatte, and army commander Lieutenant General Sirilal Weerasootiya, replied that no major operations can be launched until replacements are found for the nearly 800 soldiers who were casualties in the last operation, sources said. Until such time, the 53rd and 55th Divisions cannot be

considered fit to spearhead a major offensive. The 53rd and 55th Divisions have led all of the army's major operations in the north in the last four years, starting with operation Rivi Resa, which captured Jaffna. The army's only other major strike division is the 54th which is in the Wannu, but played no major part in the last operation.

Asked by the president when most of the 700 wounded will be fit for action, the generals replied that it will be at least 6-8 weeks before the wounded in the lesser injured categories, who form the bulk of the casualties,

ly results, and can be expected to fight a delaying action tooth and nail, to hold out until then.

The Tigers have historically relied on the changing of governments in Colombo, to bring a respite for them, since a new party in power means a new political strategy in the war. This happened when President R. Premadasa took office in 1988, when President D. B. Wijetunge was appointed in 1994, and when the PA came to power in 1994.

Since the LTTE broke the last ceasefire on April 19, 1995, and called off peace talks, the government had relied on a strategy of inflicting heavy military defeats on the Tigers and forcing them to negotiate unconditionally, before the next elections.

This strategy worked until about 18 months ago with the entire Jaffna Peninsula and large areas of the Wannu being brought under government control, at heavy cost to both sides. But since then, the army has not been able to inflict a single defeat on the LTTE, in terms of numbers of Tigers killed. Nor have any major towns been captured since then, although large areas of the jungles in the Mannar district have been captured.

Several senior People's Alliance politicians recently reported to the president that both the United National Party, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna would be using the impasse in the war as the main means of attacking the PA.

The PA members also told the president that voting trends at the recent provincial council elections, together with prevailing sentiment

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among the public, clearly showed a hung parliament after the next election. Expectations are of significant gains by the JVP (which now has only one seat in the House) eroding into the number of seats held by both the PA and the UNP.

The president ordered the generals to come up with new military strategies, apart from the push northwards in the Mannar district, to make as much gains in territory as possible before the elections.

She has not yet decided on the date for the polls, but the constitution demands that they be held within six years of the last one, which was on August 17, 1994.

Meanwhile intelligence has warned of heightened LTTE activity in Colombo and the east, after Rana Ghosha V, and has cautioned for the need for vigilance against possible bomb attacks in Colombo and other major cities.

Although no air force officials were present

at the meeting, the president expressed her displeasure to the generals over the air force's bombing of a town in the LTTE controlled area on September 16, which killed 12 Tamil civilians and wounded 30, and led to the retaliatory massacre of 64 civilians in the Ampara district on September 18.

She had asked why the army and the police had no guards in the villages there? and was visibly irritated when she was told that the shortage of troops in the east is continuing, due to the operations in the north.

She had said that the army should step up its recruitment drives, but offered no solution for the lack of manpower. Two years ago, the president publicly said the government may consider conscription, but later said she had decided against it. Obviously, conscription is a most unpopular move in any country, and would be the last nail in the PA's coffin if it is even considered at this time, with the elections drawing near.