

PM quotes Army Court inquiry report on Pooneryn in House

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Why early warning not heeded?

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The Court of Inquiry appointed by the Army Commander to inquire into and report on the terrorist attack on the Pooneryn security forces complex on November 11, 1993 will, in particular report on why, in spite of early warnings given to the security forces Headquarters in Jaffna by the Director of Military Intelligence, no proper assessment of the ground situation or necessary action to monitor the build up of LTTE cadres had been taken, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe told Parliament yesterday.

Making a statement in the House on the 'terrorist attack on the Pooneryn security forces complex', the Prime Minister said the Court of Inquiry consisting of four senior army officers, will reveal whether the terrorists succeeded in infiltrating the defences several hours before the main attack commenced which, if so, would mean that there were several large gaps in the defences not covered by the sentries. The inquiry is also expected to reveal whether the long defence lines had sufficient depth in the defences or not, and, in

particular, why there wasn't a strong obstacle belt forward of the defences. Further, the Court of Inquiry will ascertain why it took 72 hours to send reinforcements to the location and whether it was due to the non-existence of a contingency plan.

Mr. Wickremasinghe said the Court of Inquiry is expected to report on the circumstances leading to the attack and the losses suffered by the Security Forces as a result of this attack. The Prime Minister went on:

"The Pooneryn Security Forces Complex comprising of the Army Camps and the Navy Base was established on 18th October 1991, immediately after OPERATION-VALAMPURI. The primary objective for the establishment of this complex was to seal off the movement of terrorists into the Peninsula from the South and vice versa.

"The Army had two infantry Battalions together with supporting arms/services units (1 SLLI and 3 GR) manning a continuous bunker line extending almost to 8 kilometres from Pooneryn towards the West upto the coast. The total troops availability was 56 officers and 2236 other ranks.

"The Navy was manning the Nagathevanthurai Naval Base with 268 Navy personnel. Some of the Navy personnel assisted the Army by manning the forward defence lines in Pooneryn along with Army personnel.

"There were several positive indications of an impending attack on the Pooneryn complex, and this information had been conveyed to the 2 Division and the Security Forces HQ Jaffna. The conduct of the "OPERATION YALDEVI" by the security forces may have delayed their attack. Several attempts made by the LTTE cadres to infiltrate the FDLS were detected during the recent past. The LTTE on its broadcasts to the public in Jaffna had assured them that the security forces would be dislodged from the Pooneryn Complex and thus a safe passage across the Jaffna lagoon would be made available soon. The blockade imposed on the free movement in the lagoon was the main sore point for the terrorists.

On 11th November 1993, around 0200 hrs, the LTTE terrorists launched a massive attack from land and the lagoon simultaneously engaging the Nagathevanthurai Naval Base and

the Army defence lines in Pooneryn. It is now believed that prior to the attack, the LTTE terrorists had managed to infiltrate a group through the FDLS, who had overrun the gun positions and the armour positions. As a result of the attack, the Nagathevanthurai Naval Base was completely overrun and all craft were either destroyed or taken over by the LTTE terrorists.

The Western side of the defences were overrun during the attack and the Commanding officer of the SLLI with his Battalion HQ regrouped and fell back to the Eastern defences where the 3 GR Battalion HQ held firm. Another group that was dislodged from the Western defence consisting of approximately 450 personnel regrouped to the South of Komar on the Western Coast. This group was at a major disadvantage due to lack of communication with either Palaly HQ or with the Pooneryn group.

The attack continued during the day hours of 11th November 1993 and the Air Force carried out continuous sorties to detect and

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destroy the enemy. Several attempts made to land helicopters to rescue the casualties had to be abandoned due to terrorist fire. On the same day, the Service Commanders proceeded to Palaly, assessed the ground situation and decided to send in reinforcements by sea as the situation did not permit any air landings. The objective was to rescue the casualties and reinforce the defences of Pooneryn.

On 12th November 1993 attempts made to induct two infantry companies to secure a beach head on the Western Coast near Kalmunai point were unsuccessful due to heavy enemy resistance, the balance reinforcements from the East were inducted to Palaly during the day. 58 persons (46 Navy and 12 Army) were rescued by the Elephant Pass Camp after they had swam across the lagoon from the Nagathevanthurai Naval Base.

During the night of the 12th November 1993, the LTTE terrorists made several attempts to overrun the defences in Pooneryn. The defending troops held on valiantly and successfully repulsed the attacks. The Air Force maintained continuous vigilance during the night and destroyed a large number of LTTE cadres. It is estimated that the LTTE lost approximately 150 cadres during that night.

On 13th November 1993, at about 1400 hrs, 800 troops (6GW) with Colonel Kottegoda, the Brigade Commander 10 Brigade Group, landed safely about 2 kms. North of Komar. The same evening Air Force helicopters safely landed on the Western Coast at a point South of Komar where Captain Soya had regrouped about 450 personnel. This group was not in communication with the Palaly Base, since 11th November. They were provided with the necessary radio equipment and communications were soon established.

On 14th November 1993, around 700 hrs. Lieutenant Colonel Nimal Jayasuriya with about 100 soldiers from 3 SLLI and 4 SLLI were heli-lifted to marry-up with Captain Soya's group. Having regrouped, they advanced towards Pooneryn for the link up with the Pooneryn troops. The LTTE did not offer any major resistance to the advancing troops. The link-up was completed by 1430 hrs. and helicopters commenced the evacuation of casualties. Troops under Colonel Kottegoda continued to clear the area whilst advancing towards the main Pooneryn defences.

On 15th November 1993 the evacuation of casualties continued, and by afternoon all casualties were evacuated. Further troops were inducted by air to Pooneryn for the clearing operation which is now in progress. At present, around 1800 troops have been inducted to carry out the clearing operations.

As far as the Army and the Navy personnel are concerned, the casualty rate is high. Eight officers and 233 other ranks have been killed in action.