

A politicised army and state terrorism. (1995, September 10). *The Sunday times.*

A politicised Army and state terrorism

One does not normally have the time to read the voluminous Sunday newspapers these days except to make a cursory glance of the most important headlines. They are usually laid aside to be read later.

In doing so recently I noticed that *The Sunday Times* of June 18, 79 reported that "contrary to the contentions made that Brigadier T.I. Weeratunga claims to have eradicated terrorism that nearly all the hardcore terrorists have left the Northern Province mainly to India and some to other parts of the Country."

The directive issued by Brigadier Weeratunga by the then President Jayewardene on July 12, 79 reads as follows:

"It will be your duty to eliminate in accordance with the laws of this land the menace of terrorism in all its forms from the Jaffna District. I will place at your disposal all resources of the state. I earnestly request all law abiding citizens to give their cooperation to you. This task has to be performed by you and completed before December 31, 1979."

Having read your report and since "the mantle of command of the security operations in Jaffna" passed on to me I wish to respond not only to put the record straight but also to dispel any misconceptions your reading public may have had that I too was a party to the dismal failure of this high powered operation.

To begin with, this task, if at all, should have been given to the Commander of the Army who would have then chosen the most competent and capable Officer in the Army.

Until your situation report was published on June 18 Brigadier Weeratunga's TOP SECRET 74-page Report was known only to himself and the then President J.R. Jayewardene. It was Privy even to the Commander of the Army and the other Service Commanders and the IGP. The fact that terrorism had not been eliminated by Brigadier Weeratunga as directed by the then President has been made public through

your newspaper 16 years later. In the absence of an official release, the contention of the two retired Military Officers that after the Security Operations in 1979 the Brigadier Weeratunga had in reporting, said he had eradicated terrorism and had so misdirected the political establishment is understandable.

As his successor as Security Force Commander it seems paradoxical that I was unaware of this so called TOP SECRET REPORT nor was I given a verbal or written Brief of the Military Operations said to have been conducted during this magical six-month period or what was expected of me as the incoming Commander of the Security Forces in Jaffna.

Reading through the extracts of the TOP SECRET REPORT as published by you, it is evident that Brigadier Weeratunga had failed to achieve the objectives set out by the then President despite the fact that all resources of the State were placed under his disposal.

Under these circumstances President Jayewardene should have done one of three things -

Sacked Brig. Weeratunga; extended the time frame given to him to accomplish his mission; or directed me as his successor to continue from where Brig. Weeratunga finished, giving me the same resources made available to Brig. Weeratunga.

In your report, you state that "the mantle of the Command of Security Operations in Jaffna passed on to me (who was among retired officers promoted to rank of Major General last week)" implying that I was expected to carry on from where Brig. Weeratunga finished.

I occupied a H.Q. without even a miniscular fraction of the men and material that were available to my predecessor implying that "Terrorism" had been wiped out in Jaffna.

The only Officer left behind from his vast staff drawn from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Police was a Junior Lieutenant

who was in charge of a Guard Platoon in the Jaffna Residency. The State of Emergency was allowed to lapse on 31 December 1979, and I had no special powers to deal with any situation. I took over duties in January 1980.

Although no men, material, files or vehicles were left behind (even a helicopter was provided to my predecessor) I inherited a legacy of unpaid mess bills of my predecessor's staff. With the setting up of this HQ most of the powers vested in the Service Commanders and the IGP were stealthily taken away from them through the Secretary Defence Col. Dharmapala (now deceased) an active politician himself.

Officers and other staff required to man this HQ were selected not for their competence, but for personal loyalties based on political considerations. The Service Commanders and the IGP did not have any say in these selections. Thus began the systematic dismantling of the Command Structure of the Army and with it one witnessed an unprecedented decline of discipline.

This period in Jaffna witnessed the climate being created for the haunching of state terrorism which followed with the burning of the Jaffna Library and the disappearance of ballot boxes during the DDC Elections.

There were many things which were achieved in this "operation". The Army was politicized and political commissars emerged. The Army Commander's powers were usurped by these Political Commissars to carry out acts of state terrorism and torture against unarmed innocent civilians.

These political Commissars set into motion the systematic elimination of everybody who were obstacles to their own progress and who were not, inclined to toe their line.

It is in this backdrop that the "mantle of the Command of the Security Forces" operations in Jaffna" was passed over to me.

I who was also Inspector General of Field Forces was twiddling my thumbs doing nothing

in Jaffna and on representations made by me, the Commander of the Army addressed a letter to the Secretary Defence Col. C. A. Dharmapala on May 13 1980, four months after I assumed Command of the Security Forces in Jaffna as follows:-

"1. With regard to the Command Organization in Jaffna I do not think that there is sufficient justification at the moment for the retention of an Officer of the rank of Brigadier with the HQ as presently organized because as you are aware the Army and the Armed Forces have no special powers after the lapse of the State of Emergency. In the present circumstances it is best that the matter be handled under the control of the Police and I recommend that the DIG (Northern Range) be made responsible for this task and he will be assisted by the Commander Northern Command (Task Force 4) an Officer of the rank of Colonel, if Military Operations are required.

2. In the event of the situation developing in Jaffna or its environs, Brigadier Athukorale in his capacity as Inspector General Field Forces or any other Senior Officer may be stationed in Jaffna to carry out Security Duties.

3. At present I have numerous commitments for Brigadier Athukorale in his capacity of Inspector General Field Forces and having visited Jaffna recently on more than one occasion I frankly do not see much work to

be done by a separate HQ functioning as it did during the period of the Emergency.

4. I have discussed this matter with the IGP who is in agreement with me that the overall control for Operations should be handed over to the DIG (Northern Range).

5. If my recommendation is acceptable I suggest the closure of the HQ Security Forces, Jaffna with effect from January 1, 1981."

The Army Commander's considered opinion was disregarded as the aim of the exercise had been to harass me. I continued to be in Jaffna until Security Force HQ closed down on January 25 '81, seven months after the Army Commander's letter. For no rhyme or reason Security Force HQ was re-opened on April 7, '81 in a small office room of the Northern Command HQ in Palaly and I was banished to Jaffna for the second time, and on this occasion with no Staff assigned to me at all. The Secretary Defence took the unprecedented step of informing the Army Commander that I should not leave Jaffna without his permission. This HQ was finally closed on July 27, '81. Jaffna was considered a punishment station and at the time, that I was there it is on record that 80 per cent of the Police Personnel in Jaffna were on punishment transfers. In a letter written by Lieut General J.E.D. Perera on June

30, 1984 to me, six months after I retired is eloquent testimony of what the Army Commander at the time thought of this "operation" and the role I had to play as a "political exile" of Col. Dharmapala with whom I had only a nodding acquaintance. The hidden hand of Dharmapala is not too difficult to guess.

The relevant extract of the letter of June 30, '84 is quoted below:-

"It is worrying to see how the Terrorist activity is going on. If a proper job of clearing them was done in 1979, this would not have happened. The "Tigers" were NOT arrested, but were driven across to India where they became more militant. Instead of withdrawing troops in 1980, old Dharmapala was insisting on your presence in Jaffna. That was the time I recommended a Naval Cordon and a campaign of winning hearts and minds in Jaffna. The experts thought otherwise and now see the mess! I do hope that such stupid mistakes will not be repeated by these same experts."

Now that the public are "aware" that there has been a "TOP SECRET" Report it is not too late to disclose its contents especially the chapter relating to expenditure, if there is one.

I do hope you would give this letter the same publicity you gave to your Report of June 18, 1995.

Major Gen. H. V. Athukorale, Dehiwela