

Army throws full weight behind PM. (1994, October 30). The Sunday Times.

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THE SUNDAY TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 30, 1994

FEATURES

Army throws full weight behind PM

By Our Defence Correspondent

Terrorism has raised its ugly head again leaving a trail of bloody carnage in Grandpass and invariably dragging the two-month-old PA government to its first crisis situation.

Just hours after the 'Black Monday's' bomb attack which claimed the life of the Leader of the Opposition and presidential aspirant Gamage Lionel Dissanayake, the Security Council met at an emergency session at the President's House.

Here, a worried and confused Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga asked the council members as to what could happen as a result of the assassination of Mr. Dissanayake. Assurances came from none other than the man whom according to media reports was at loggerheads with the Premier. It was Defence Secretary, General Hamilton Wanasinghe, "Madam, we have gone through this before and we can come out of this too," he said. Ms. Kumaratunga who was visibly shaken had then asked as to how the army would respond in such a crisis. "Security forces are duty-bound to give their maximum support to the govern-

ment," Gen. Wanasinghe reassured the Premier, adding that she had their fullest support. The Security Council then decided to postpone the peace talks until after the election.

The government with the consensus of the Security Council decided to do its best to salvage the peace efforts, with the peace delegation returning to Jaffna after the Presidential election on November 9.

The government quite rightly instructed the Inspector General of Police to convince the people that the investigations were far from over. But to the forensic experts who visited the scene, the government and the military top brass, it was a foregone conclusion as to who was responsible for the midnight attack.

For the unmistakable trademark of the LTTE was stamped all over - a suicide bomber. If the investigations cannot prove it was the handwork of the LTTE, who then, was responsible? That it was indeed a suicide bomber cannot be contradicted or contested.

Only one severed head was found on a roof top, and no other. Explosives experts know that for a human head to catapult high onto a roof of a build-

ing, the explosion has to be triggered off immediately below it, presumably around the waist.

The question then is, who is capable of executing a suicide operation? In this part of the world, the LTTE 'Trademark' is yet to be infringed.

The attack on the UNP campaign rally came barely a week after the military and police intelligence had warned of an LTTE attack before the election, but the intelligence suspected the attack would be on a security establishment. The intelligence also knew that Gamage Dissanayake had been a 'priority target' for the LTTE and had issued repeated warnings during the past six months.

The attack on Gamage Dissanayake was supposed to have been executed in June this year, but he was lucky then. Unknown to him and the intelligence, an LTTE suicide squad was putting the final touches to its plan to assassinate Mr. Dissanayake. But then the unexpected! On a random raid, the police took into custody two youths and on interrogation and further investigations, the law-enforcement officers realised they had accidentally caught a

prize catch - One of the suspects revealed the details of the planned assassination attempt. When Gamage Dissanayake was informed of this he made a strange request to the government to keep the whole affair a secret.

Forewarned and forearmed, Mr. Dissanayake decided to ride his luck. But despite repeated warnings he had not worn his body armour on that fateful day. Despite knowing his friend and colleague Lalith Athulathmudali would have served the assassin's bullets, had he worn the bullet-proof vest, he still refused to do so. "When you are on the field everyday, staging a strenuous election campaign, how do you expect me to wear the heavy and cumbersome jacket?" he had recently told his security personnel.

On Monday morning, a dozen ball bearings penetrated his chest causing the fatal wounds.

The cyanide capsule found intact at the scene of the explosion has raised a few puzzling questions. Investigators are probing whether the capsule had belonged to the man appearing to be covering his face in the picture taken by the photographer who was hired by Mr.

Dissanayake to cover his election campaign.

There is a possibility, he may have left a few minutes before the explosion, leaving the cyanide capsule behind to avoid identification if taken in later as suspect.

A prominent supporter of the UNP had reportedly told the investigators that he had seen a man and a woman resembling the party covered figures in the photographs. Interestingly, he had added that the couple were seen occupying front-row seats in several previous meetings.

The military intelligence, meanwhile, is being cautioned to the possibility of the LTTE having Chandrika Kumaratunga also in its hit list.

Defence analysts who had been monitoring the latest developments in Jaffna, say that Ms. Kumaratunga though unwittingly, is turning out to be a threat to the popularity of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

Prabhakaran's plan to go for peace talks seems to have backfired with the government of Ms. Kumaratunga turning out to be extremely popular among the peace-hungry people of Jaffna. The government, it seems is pursuing the strategy adopted by

the late General Denzil Kobbekaduwa. "The only way to find a solution to this war is to first win the hearts and minds of the people in Jaffna," he would repeatedly say.

When asked to comment on the uncertain future of the government's attempts to talk peace with the LTTE, Defence Secretary Wanasinghe said the military would back the government in persisting with peace talks.

"It's the LTTE which wants to stall the talks, but we will support the government to continue with the talks which will bring more pressure on the LTTE to favour a negotiated settlement to the war," he said.

The Defence Secretary had a word of advice to the people when he said the country should realize Prabhakaran's motive is to stall the talks through continued aggravation and therefore collectively support any peace-efforts.

Asked if the military is secretly opposed to peace talks in Jaffna, Gen. Wanasinghe said the security commanders and he himself had assured the Premier they would extend their fullest co-operation.

Gen. Wanasinghe said the Prime Minister's remarks about the military had been gravely exaggerated and added that there was no animosity between the government and the security forces.

The PA government appears to have realized the 'would be' consequences of distancing itself from the security forces or isolating the top brass.

This correspondent reliably learns that Defence Secretary, General Wanasinghe had been given another extension until August 16, 1995. Asked if he would now continue as the Defence Secretary, Gen. Wanasinghe said he had not been asked to go.

Meanwhile the Security Council was concerned about the security situation in view of yesterday's funeral of Mr. Dissanayake. Acting Army Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. R. Daluwatte was appointed last week to co-ordinate security in Colombo.

As tension spread throughout the country, heavily armed troops were deployed in sensitive areas with special details being considered for Colombo.

An armoured squadron of 10 Saladin cars have been brought to Colombo along with an additional contingent of soldiers numbering nearly 2000. Two companies of Field Engineers who were in charge of security details in Palaly had also been air-lifted to Colombo.

As people are reminded of the terror campaign which gripped the country in the recent past, people in the North as well as the South can only hope Prabhakaran will respond to the peace calls of his people positively. After all, he claims, he is the sole representative of the Tamils in Jaffna. And their cry for peace had never been louder.

Former Speaker M.H. Mohamed was perhaps the most fortunate man and had the last laugh with death. Nearing mid-night, he was still seated in the front row on stage with no intention of leaving before the conclusion of the Presidential candidate's speech.

Then General Secretary Gamage Wijesekera came on stage closer to mid-night. Having noticed Dr. Wijesekera did not have a seat, the former speaker got up and offered his chair saying he was going home.