

Ghost attack mars 'Watershed' victory. (1999, October 24). The Sunday times.

Ghost attack mars 'Watershed' victory

Deputy Defence Minister, Anuruddha Ratwatte, was in an exceptionally buoyant mood last Wednesday.

Moments after arriving at Kanakarayankulam, he sat down to watch video footage of the latest military offensive of the security forces "Operation Watershed". He was joined by Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Srial Weerasooriya, Air Force Commander, Air Marshal Jayalatha Jayawardena and DIG Lionel Karunaseena, who was representing the Police Chief. In a second Mi-17, which was chasing the VIP helicopter, was Navy Commander, Vice Admiral Cecil Tissera. He joined in too.

The footage showed details of Tiger guerrilla casualties, with bodies strewn around, weapons, documents seized from the enemy and the newer areas brought under security forces control.

Later Minister Ratwatte chaired a conference of senior officers. Brigade Commanders and Commanding Officers at the 55 Division Headquarters. He congratulated the officers and men for what he called the successful conduct of "Operation Watershed" and for the damage inflicted on the enemy during the three day long offensive.

That not only lit up the faces of those in the conference room. Some talked in whispers about the Minister Ratwatte giving them credit, rightfully theirs, whilst the Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence, for strange reasons, attempted to divert attention from the operation by resorting to disinformation.

As revealed in these columns last week, the Op Hq said in a news release:

"... around 11 am in general area East of Ampaknam, terrorists launched an attack on the forward defence line with machine guns and mortars. Troops retaliated effectively with artillery causing heavy casualties among the terrorists."

"This Op Hq MOD claim caused serious concerns at the highest levels of the security establishment. After the revelations in the Situation Report last week, top officials were ascertaining why such a news release containing wrong and misleading information was issued as an official news release."

Concerns were heightened because of a perception that higher echelons that the contents of the news release were not only embarrassed the Government but was also not fair by the officers and men who fought bravely, some sacrificing their lives and others sustaining injuries. If the claim of attacks on the forward defence lines have been dropped from subsequent news releases, there have been no word at all on the conduct of "Operation Watershed", which Minister Ratwatte believes is a success and has congratulated the officers and men who took part. More on that later.

The two Mi-17 helicopters carrying Minister Ratwatte and his entourage first flew to Olumada, where the Army 55 Division's Tactical Headquarters for the conduct of "Operation Watershed" was located. There, the team received a first hand briefing on how the latest offensive progressed and how the troops succeeded in extending their defence lines. Minister Ratwatte mistakenly stepped into a hollow patch and fell down. Brigadier Boharan rushed in to help him out as the service chiefs who were also moved in. He was, however, unharmed. It was from there that they arrived at the 55 Division Headquarters in Kanakarayankulam.

More details on the three day long "Operation Watershed" have now emerged. It began amidst light showers at 11 am on November 14. The Army left off a barrage of pre-bombardment artillery fire from 130 mm, 122 mm and 152 mm guns on locations followed, troops killed in action clear which made the

LTTE believe that troops were to resume an advance and advanced did the LTTE highway a move which the LTTE resisted for 18 long hours during the conduct of "Operation Jaya Sikuru" (Victory Assured). The Government on December 4, last year, announced this operation was being called off.

It was only after troops broke out from their defences and advanced did the LTTE realise their intentions. The security forces defence lines east of the A-9 highway at Mankulam jets into a box like area northwards upto Ampaknam, lanes down southwards at Kurappadamurru and extends (along the Mankulam-Mullaitivu road) to Oduddusudan. From here it goes further southwards to Nedunkerni.

The movement in fact was the advance of troops occupying the box shaped stretch of territory. They were entering the box by moving in a north easterly direction. Troops on the western (or left) flank of this advance, as well as a part of eastern flank, was led by Colonel Abula Lankadeva. Columns of troops led by Col. Anula Jayawardena followed from the western flank whilst troops led by Col. Bahar

diers. A further 15 officers and 397 soldiers were wounded, almost all of them from artillery or mortar fire.

There is still confusion over the exact Tiger guerrilla casualties. Last Sunday, the LTTE accepted 32 bodies of their cadres through the ICRC at Mankulam. They have refused to accept some bodies on the grounds that they were civilians.

Military officials insist that civilians who were hit were those busy helping the LTTE to fortify their defence lines. One high ranking source said "they were helping in this work even before the operations began. We know that some 29 civilians died as a result."

These officials insist that 129 LTTE cadres, 85 per cent of them women, were killed. This figure, they claim, is based on both High Frequency (HF) and Very High Frequency (VHF) radio intercepts. However, some sources placed the figure at 65 Tiger cadres, mostly women.

And now to the claim by the Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence that "terrorists launched an attack to the forward defence line with machine guns and mortars. Troops retaliated ef-



Troops in the Wanni

fectively with artillery causing heavy casualties among the terrorists..."

The unsuspecting media, both local and foreign, believed the Op Hq account of an LTTE attack on the security forces defences at 11 am on October 14. Reports both in Sri Lanka and abroad about this account received wide play. But it is now well known that the claimed attacks did not take place. Instead, at 11 am on the same date that the security forces launched "Operation Watershed".

Why then this disinformation? Why has there been no mention of the launch of this operation, when all other operations have been announced when they were launched? The attempt at disinformation has revealed one worrisome factor, that news of the war is continuing to be managed and manipulated. A more disturbing feature is the fact that it comes in the backdrop of a 16 month old censorship, introduced on June 5, last year. Compounding the situation further is the ban on media personnel visiting the operational areas. The only exception has been the conducted tours.

The management of news from the battle areas, needless to say, poses credibility problems for the Government and casts serious doubts on whatever reports that come as official accounts on the ongoing separatist war. If this has been one of the main reasons that have eroded public support, there is no doubt it has contributed to continuing desertions and a pathetic lack of response to recruitment drives. The public who are contributing to the war effort are clearly being denied the truth. This time, strange enough, a truth which the Government would like to tell and the public would be happy to know.

If the increasing monsoonal showers has severely impeded troops advance, both during "Operation Watershed" and phase two of "Operation Relu Paharu" that followed, another factor that portends to place military offensives on hold will be the upcoming Presidential elections, most certain to be held during the second week of December this year. A string of incidents triggered off by the LTTE, both in the operational areas as

well as outside, has left the inevitable feeling in Colombo's intelligence community that they may make attempts to scuttle the elections. The subject figured at a top level conference at the Ministry of Defence, early this week, where measures to step up security for VIPs and political leaders facing threats were discussed.

By a co-incidence, representatives of Tamil political parties met the Army's Chief of Staff, Major General Lionel Balagalle, early this week for talks on enhanced personal protection. Although the meeting had been previously scheduled, the issuing of a proclamation by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, on the conduct of a Presidential poll 16 months ahead of schedule, has added significance to the meeting. In fact one group of representatives were known to have been in conference with Maj. Gen. Balagalle when one participant's cellphone rang. He broke the news at the conference that there would be an early Presidential poll.

It is indeed strange that the Op Hq of the Ministry of Defence that has never been slow to claim credit for any successful military gains against the LTTE should not only make a modest exception in the case of "Operation Watershed", but also go to the extent of misinforming the public by suppressing that success to a non event.

Equally curious is the fact that those known to turn military successes to a personal aggrandisement should in the

case of "Operation Watershed" modestly give credit to the Army's publicity whilst maintaining deafening silence on the disinformation exercise by the Op Hq of the MOD.

The juggle to the Presidential polls coincides with the monsoon period when operations in the North will be difficult, it would seem politically sensible, in the context of the polls, to go slow on the military effort. The military inactivity could always be justified due to monsoon conditions, not altogether incorrectly. In as much as it may be desirable for the Government to go slow militarily, the operational preferences of the LTTE may well be diametrically opposite. But whether the LTTE would want to accelerate operations to a point of seeming to upset the democratic process in the country is strategic gamble.

That, in all probability, will not be to the liking of Western democracies where the LTTE are already under pressure. The best option for the LTTE to go slow with the view of pressurising a new President to negotiate peace with third party mediation.

So, whereas politico-military thinking for the next few months dictates a go slow strategy to back election manifestoes, including a settlement of the vested question which has dogged this island nation for decades, the reality of peace will depend on the will of the people of all communities and the wisdom of their elected leaders to place the Nation above parochial politics.

SITUATION REPORT



BY IQBAL ATHAS

Morsh followed from the eastern flank. Leading the operation was Brigadier T.M. Boharan, General Officer Commanding the 55 Division. One Brigade from the 56 Division (561) also took part in the operation.

Earlier, troops of the second battalion of Special Forces led by Major Upul Weerasinghe moved ahead to attack enemy positions and pave the way for the advance. If the pre bombardment of locations ahead of Mankulam with artillery fire made the LTTE believe troops had begun an advance to re-capture more of the A-9 highway, military officials believe there were other fears when the troops continued their advance. The north easterly advance of the box like territory (the northern most stretch in the Wanni) under security forces control, they say, raised fears of a possible security forces advance towards Mullaitivu now the nerve centre of LTTE activity.

From late afternoon on October 14 (Thursday), LTTE fired heavy artillery and mortars on the advancing troops. They used 122 mm artillery guns, 60 mm, 80 mm and 120 mm mortars. A bitter battle since "Operation Jaya Sikuru" had begun. Most of the firing came from the direction of Muthaiyankadu, an area which troops earlier planned to encompass. Heavy barrages of mortar and artillery fire by the Army forced the LTTE to fall back from their positions.

Like on the first day, light showers continued on day two of the operation. On both days, adverse weather conditions prevented the Sri Lanka Air Force from providing air cover. But conditions improved on the third day with Mi-17 helicopter gunships and Ki-27 jets joining in the action. Later that day (October 16, Saturday) when "Operation Watershed" ended, troops had advanced a little over two kilometers. The extension of the box like territory had led to the re-capture of some 12 square kilometres of territory.

With the conclusion of the latest operation and the consolidation process that followed, troops killed in action were one officer and 37 sol-

EXCLUSIVE

Neelan's killing: a major breakthrough

The man whom Police suspect was tasked by LTTE intelligence wing leader, Potu Amman, to help kill TULF Parliamentarian and lawyer, Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam, is now their custody.

Eric Savundranayagam, a telephone operator at a Communications Centre in Wellawatte, was arrested last week, hardly an hour after he returned from a trip to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He is now being held on a detention order issued under Emergency Regulations.

The circumstances leading to his arrest are as follows: Police had to overcome some serious technical difficulties, remains a closely guarded secret.

Investigations have revealed that Savundranayagam followed a courier at the Technical College at Maradana. He had been given instructions to do so and told to wait until an emissary made contact with him and turned out that the emissary was Kathiravan, a fellow student at Union College, Jaffna, in their younger days.

On one occasion, Kathiravan had brought a message to Savundranayagam requesting him to urgently travel to Wanni. When he took a break from attending classes and went there, Potu Amman had personally given him a briefing at an LTTE hide-out in Pathakudannurpu.

Potu Amman, the LTTE intelligence wing leader is a most wanted man in India for plotting the assassination of one time Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. He was killed by a female suicide bomber at Sri Perampudur, a town in the outskirts of Madras, where he attended an election rally.

During the briefing to Savundranayagam, Potu Amman is learnt to have spelled out seven different targets. He had been told to assist Tiger guerrilla hit squads operating in the City, both through surveillance and other forms of assistance, to ensure attacks were successfully carried out. The targets were:

- 03. Kill EPPDP leader, Douglas Devananda.
- 04. Kill Inspector Jayaraman of the Counter Terrorist Unit at Mount Lavinia Police.
- 05. Kill TULF MP, Ananda Sangar.
- 06. Kill Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam.

Savundranayagam is alleged to have made reference to Dr. Tiruchelvam's killing and boasted how he could get things done. Although Kamalan, who is now in custody had admitted to the telephone call and the references made, Savundranayagam had denied the allegations during initial stages of the interrogation. Police are continuing their interrogation and were due to question him on other vital information they have received.

By then, Savundranayagam, Police say, is a significant breakthrough in investigations into Dr. Tiruchelvam's killing. During the first two months after the incident, Police were literally against a blank wall with no information forthcoming on the murder.

This breakthrough was made by the Mount Lavinia Police who have uncovered several LTTE links in the City. This developed from investigations they began into the attempted killing of C/INilabdeen in March, this year.

These investigations are under the overall charge of Jayawanta Wickremaratne, D/C (Western Province - South).

During the conversation, involvement in the killing of Dr. Tiruchelvam and how the plot to eliminate him was hatched.

On July 29, a lone suicide bomber hid himself on Dr. Tiruchelvam's car at Rosmead Place-Kyesee Road junction killing him on the spot.

Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam, a telecommunications and media Minister, Managala Samarawera.

The Jungle Telegraph

By Alia

Raises a storm

A top cop's repeated charges of collusion with the underworld by some of his colleagues has raised a storm at Police Headquarters.

Whilst he has received a number of letters to a bailer's home, none of which they say is unbecoming, there are whispers in the corridors of Police Headquarters about a new dossier.

It not only contains some juicy stuff not printable but also other documented incidents (names, dates and times given), which some sources say should not have been encouraged or done by those who preach righteousness and virtues.

In one incident, not so long ago, speaks of how a sergeant and a driver went in the boss' official car to 'raid' a kaspipallic (liquor den). The boss' official revolver was aimed at the muddali who ran the outfit. The latter was forced to part with a stack of green notes.

The dossier that ensued, the duo were dismissed but there was no word about what happened to the money.

It is also about the acquisition of a house in a cooler climate for an attractive figure. When the incumbent refused to leave, he was greeted with a hail of stones. There will be raised eyebrows when the political bosses get to see the dossier.

New precedent

One military top man's explanation of his explanation of a retired commander's involvement in criminal charges, as guest of honour for an exhibition to mark the Army's 50th anniversary, has amused the public.

"We can invite anyone as long as they are not don't meet the Fairness and the response of the officer and gentleman concerned."

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But now comes the story of some of the officers and commissions. They include the case of two retired officers, one of whom retired in the recent years, being left out. A former leadership of the People's Alliance during the 50th year.

Also among those not considered were a group of retired Army officers who backed the People's Alliance during the General and Presidential elections in 1994. Some of these officers, who complained of the political victimisation, were promoted to the rank of Majors General.

Who remarked? "We don't meet the Fairness and Generals? Your guess is as good as mine!"

Rude shock

Thirty seven years a diplomat, three times Sri Lanka's ambassador in leading world capitals and now a Municipal Councilor, C. Mahendran, had a rude shock last Friday.

A small group of men, heavily armed and in uniform, stormed his house at 4 a.m. and demanded they conduct a full search. When he protested, they withdrew only to come in a bigger strength half an hour later.

A war of wits ensued between the underworld and the men entering his house at that hour. He had asked that they return and conduct a full search without entering the house but never returned. The man who secured the issue was the security authorities.