

Army, LTTE consolidate themselves. (1993, December 05). *The Sunday observer.*

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By The Sunday Times Defence Correspondent

Some next week and the whole world will hear Prime Minister Rami Wickremesinghe describe the Pooneryn disaster as the worst setback suffered by Sri Lankan security forces.

This is when the Atlanta (United States) based Cable News Network (CNN), the 24-hour global television news service, features him in a story on the ongoing separatist war in Sri Lanka.

Facing the CNN camera at "Temple Trees" last Wednesday, Premier Wickremesinghe told the network's South Asia Bureau Chief, Ashis Ray, that the Government planned to contain terrorism in the troubled north in the next two years. Thereafter, he said, it hoped to hold elections in the north. He, however, asserted that the doors were still open for the LTTE to come for talks. But such a dialogue would also entail all other Tamil political parties, he added.

Premier Wickremesinghe answered the questions fielded to him candidly. One significant disclosure he made during the interview was that the Army was now re-building the Pooneryn defences but no steps have so far been taken to re-open the naval installations in this area. Hence there was no naval presence.

To many Sri Lankans, the tragedy of Pooneryn appears to be a thing of the past. Besides the distractions caused by the upcoming Christmas and New Year season, there were other developments that contributed to this. Among them reports of moves by Savuuyamoorthy Thondaman's Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) offering to co-operate with opposition political parties, and more lately, the arrival of the West Indies cricket team.

But tragic enough, if the losses from the Pooneryn disaster, both in terms of human lives and material, were colossal, what is happening in the aftermath appeared to be more disconcerting.

The LTTE operated boat services between Kilali and Sinna Paranthan were in full swing from last Thursday. An average of a thousand passengers were using this passage, now less hazardous with hardly any naval presence.

In the immediate aftermath of the assault on Pooneryn, the LTTE had restricted boat movements. There were less than 25 of them operating. It gradually increased and exceeded the 200 mark last Thursday. Tiger cadres were freely moving around the Kilali passage in the Sri Lanka Navy's water-jets they seized from the Nagavehathurai Navy Base.

The full resumption of the boat service on the Kilali passage came after the LTTE and civilians in the peninsula observed a week long "Heroes Week" to "honour" its cadres who had achieved what they called martyrdom. The week coincided with the birthday of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran on November 26 but it is November 27, the last day, which is marked by crowded ceremonies in the peninsula.

It is on this day (November 27) in 1982 that the first LTTE member who was shot by security forces died. Security forces who were on the lookout for "Shankar" during this time had surrounded the house of Nirmala Nijhayanathan. Whilst they were advancing, he had escaped though shot and wounded by the security forces.

"Shankar" had been treated in a house at Puttar, a village east of Jaffna, and later taken across the Palk Straits by boat to a hospital in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. "Shankar" died there on November 27.

During this year's "National Heroes Week", the LTTE went to great lengths to cash in on the "euphoria" brought about by its "victory" at Pooneryn. On display, both in the peninsula and in Kilinochchi were the array of military hardware the Tigers had seized from the



Victims of Pooneryn: wounded soldiers awaiting evacuation at Palaly airport

security forces both from the controversial "Operation Yal Devi" and the subsequent attack on the Pooneryn defences.

A key attraction in Kilinochchi was the display of Czechoslovak built Main Battle Tank (MBT) which the Tigers seized at Pooneryn. A second MBT which was also seized by the Tiger terrorists was later bombed and immobilised by the Sri Lanka Air Force aircraft.

Whilst putting the weapons on display, the LTTE appears to be maintaining a studied silence on the fate of "prisoners of war" it had taken after the attack on the Pooneryn sector. The security forces have had confirmation about the cases of only five wounded men who are in the Jaffna General Hospital. Here too, their identities are not known.

The case of these five according to reports reaching Colombo, could be the same as an Army private who was at the Elephant Pass Camp when "Operation Balavegaya" was under way in 1989. This 28 day long operation was launched to regain the camp which came under an LTTE siege.

Private Upali, who was wounded, had been picked up by the Tigers together with their wounded and sent to the Jaffna General Hospital. Since Tiger cadres had been wearing the same fatigues as Private Upali, they had assumed he was one of them.

Private Upali had pretended he could not talk whilst undergoing treatment. He had, however, broken silence when he came face to face with an official from the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) at the

hospital. It was only when the ICRC officially documented him that he came to be identified as Private Upali. He now continues to receive medical care under their supervision.

Prime Minister Rami Wickremesinghe's two-year time frame to contain terrorism in the north includes two significant events in the politics of Sri Lanka.

President D. B. Wijetunga has already declared that he would hold Presidential elections in December 1994 and Parliamentary elections in March, 1995. He made this announcement at a rally in Danture in the Yatinuwara electorate.

In the context of the elections being held before expiry of the time frame within which Premier Wickremesinghe plans to contain the north east situation, the conflict if unsettled would have a bearing on the southern political development. This could be exacerbated by the Thondaman factor and the CWC posture.

It is too early to attempt any prognosis on how these conflicting issues will bear on each other but no doubt all political parties, in particular the mainstream, would be preoccupied with this matter. With the country getting increasingly immune to the tragedies of the war, the "voter reaction" is also unpredictable and anyone's guess. Perhaps eciohoitic issues including the high cost of living might predominate their thinking.

In as much as the Government and all political parties are concerned with what effect these would have on the outcome of the political situation in the south, Velupillai Prabhakaran and the LTTE will no doubt, concentrate

on further consolidating both their military and administrative structure in their areas of control. They have already established infrastructural arrangements in what appears to be a de facto civil administration.

Under a tight autocracy, the LTTE has established a law and order structure of a legal and policing system. It has set up courts and appointed judges. What is significant is that these "judicial" officials have been personally selected by Prabhakaran and appointed by him taking with an oath of allegiance to him in person.

The law and order structure is supervised by ten police stations in the peninsula. The "IGP" of the "Eelam Police" has risen to this exalted rank far more rapidly than any promotions in the Sri Lanka Police - "The IGP" Mr. Nadesan was a constable in the Sri Lanka Police, last posted at Kirillapone before he deserted.

However, the "IGP" and his men appear to be under a cloud being suspected by Prabhakaran of various corrupt practices. Backing the "judiciary" and the "Police" is an organised "Prisons Department."

The "judicial" and "law and order" operations show distinctly a tight control by Prabhakaran with total allegiance to him. Likewise the administrative infrastructure has also been organised and is functioning as a separate entity. This embraces the "whole gamut" of infrastructural arrangements to collect revenue through taxes, transport system, medical health facilities, essential services and other areas of public administration. In other words a totally independent administrative structure is already in place and is being further consolidated.

In such a scenario the Government is faced with the paradoxical situation of on the one hand having to sustain its commitment to its citizens, and on the other that it cannot abdicate its commitment without driving the people in the north to dependency on Prabhakaran and the LTTE even though the amenities afforded by the Government also goes to sustain the Tigers. This is the dilemma for the Government, as indeed it is, for any other country faced with a similar situation.

In spite of the efforts of Prabhakaran to consolidate the total administration of the northern province, to create a situation where the population is beholden to him, he nevertheless, until recently was facing increasing difficulty in recruiting cadres to the LTTE.

The prolonged conflict was taking its toll on public morale. The hardships suffered, the lack of a future for youth, the inability of the LTTE to get into a winning situation over the security forces, the isolation from India and the lack of international support cumulatively diminished the belief of final victory of Prabhakaran's declared mission.

The difficulty of communication and movement between the Jaffna peninsula and the mainland was also not doing good. The security forces had a partial grip on the Jaffna peninsula with the Kilali passage being the only available route.

The closure of this route would have seriously affected the LTTE of its command and control. It would have also restricted its ability to move cadres to maintain a concentrate and disperse strategy.

The "Operation Yal Devi" was a serious threat in that regard. Moreover, "Operation Yal Devi" was the only major operation in the peninsula since the death of General Denzil Kobbekaduwa and Vijaya Wimalaratne. Against that total background "Operation Yal Devi" was perceived as being a grave threat to the centre of so called Eelam, the previous threat being the operation planned by General Kobbekaduwa to move into Jaffna. This was prevented by his untimely death.

In that context the fact that the Army did not totally exploit the success of "Operation Yal Devi" by capturing and retaining Kilali to deny the LTTE the Kilali passage, was levered by the Tiger leader to launch an effective propaganda campaign that the LTTE in fact denied Kilali to the Army.

The casualty to the Army at Pulo Pallai and the captured equipment were made use of to uphold that propaganda.

Prabhakaran effectively used the situation to re-energise the flagging morale of the population of the peninsula and by further propagandising an invasion hysteria, was able to launch a fresh recruitment drive as well.

To all it is now a time for consolidation. To the Government it must get its act together. The controversial "Operation Yal Devi" and the reversal at Pooneryn suggest the need for re-appraisal of the organisational structure of the security forces and their preparedness. Politically, even though elections in the eastern province have been postponed, the pacification programme is of utmost importance. The government needs to be wary against any LTTE initiatives in the eastern province without dropping its military guard in the north. This requires a delicate political and military balance. As for the LTTE, it is likely in the immediate term to capitalise on the propaganda of its recent successes to maintain the momentum of winning public will which recently was flagging under the attrition of the long war and the growing insularity of the LTTE cause internationally.

In this climate it will be salutary to remember the thinking, that as long as the insurgent is not losing, they are winning, and that as long as the government is not winning, they are losing.