

Military in worst debacle in nine years. (1999, November 07). *The Island*.

LTTE overruns Mankulam, Olumadu, Nedunkerni and Oddusudan

Military in worst debacle in nine years

by our Defence Correspondent.

Sri Lanka's armed forces suffered their worst defeat in nearly a decade this week, as the LTTE routed the army in the north and overran the strategically critical towns of Mankulam, Olumadu, Oddusudan and Nedunkerni in only four days.

By Friday thousands of soldiers were being airlifted in from as far off as Jaffna and Batticaloa, in a desperate bid to halt the Tigers' advance down the Jaffna-Kandy A-9 highway.

Mass confusion reigned on the battlefields, and proper casualty figures have been difficult to compile. The army has listed more than 500 soldiers as missing in action, and the navy, which was holding one section of the frontlines, has listed 200 as missing.

However, those listed as missing are not necessarily dead, since retreating army units have scattered throughout the Wanni. Some units from Oddusudan and Nedunkerni have reached Weli Oya with relatively few casualties among them.

By Friday evening, more than 700 soldiers and sailors were wounded, and had been airlifted to hospitals in Anuradhapura and Colombo.

The LTTE has admitted losing 57 cadres, but army intelligence reports that at least 200 have been killed. The true figure is probably much higher, although it is expected to be much less than the number killed on the armed forces' side.

In four days, the LTTE captured more than 220 kilometers of ground, a region that the army's operation Jaya Sikuru took about a year to capture.

Strategically speaking, the government has not lost so much ground since late 1990, when the army camps of Kilinochchi, Kokavil and Mankulam and the police station at Oddusudan were overrun, and the entire Wanni fell under the control of the LTTE.

The Tiger onslaught is clearly intended to inflict a massive defeat on the army, and deal a setback to President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's re-election

bid, in the run up to the December 21 presidential poll.

The army has launched an investigation into why intelligence did not warn of the huge attack, which is the biggest single offensive ever launched by the LTTE. How the Tigers mustered almost all their fighting cadres into one spot, undetected by the army, is the million-dollar question.

It is now known that the Tigers' plan was to overrun Oddusudan, Nedunkerni, and Mankulam, in that order, which they have achieved.

The attack began at a point about two kilometers west of Oddusudan, which is halfway between the Jaffna-Kandy road and Mullaithivu.

At 12:30 a.m. on Tuesday, November 2, a massive assault came down on the Second Gajaba Regiment, which was manning the forward defences there. Hundreds of LTTE cadres had apparently infiltrated the defences first, and the soldiers were thus not in any position to defend themselves properly.

So fierce was the attack in such huge numbers, that within two hours, the 2GR was completely overrun. Few survivors have been found from this unit. Radio contact was lost within minutes of the attack commencing, and was never regained.

As the 2GR crumbled, the LTTE turned its attention to sailors of the navy's North-central Command, who were manning the line further west, towards Olumadu. Waves of attacks came down on the sailors, who have been in the frontlines for nearly two years due to the army's shortage of manpower. But the sailors held firm, for the time being, calling for artillery support.

But south of the area where the 2GR were wiped out, panic reigned, as another large body of Tigers attacked the brigade headquarters at Oddusudan.

The battle there didn't last long, as the brigade, or what was left of it, fell into headlong retreat, withdrawing towards Nedunkerni at 1:45 a.m.

The Tigers looted the brigade headquarters, and carried off the spoils of the armoury, much of which was left intact.

Its first task of capturing Oddusudan now accomplished, the LTTE then turned its attention once more on the sailors to the

west.

The sailors hung on grimly, regrouping to ensure that the gap in the line that had been occupied by 2GR to their east, didn't cause their downfall. They repeatedly called for artillery support and reinforcements. Unlike the army, naval units in the Wanni have no reinforcements that can be sent from close by in other parts of the Wanni. Thus the naval units were depending on the army for reinforcements.

At 3 a.m., the first army reinforcements arrived, from divisional headquarters, and joined the naval troops. But with no more radio contact with either the 2GR or the Oddusudan brigade HQ, they could not go further, since the situation with those units was uncertain. One does not go blundering into a battlefield in the darkness, not knowing who is friend or foe, and where they are.

As dawn broke, a unit of Special Forces commandos arrived, and began advancing from the naval lines towards the area that had been occupied by the 2GR.

But they ran into a wall of ferocious LTTE fire that decimated their ranks within an hour. The SP withdrew.

By afternoon on Tuesday, more army reinforcements arrived, but decided that the original naval lines were not in the best defensive position. The new lines they chose were several kilometers behind the existing ones, and to conform to this, the naval units asked for permission to withdraw to where the army was, and did so. Before they went, they destroyed their own battalion headquarters.

That night, the LTTE launched a heavy assault on Nedunkerni, their second objective.

It is not clear what happened there, but the army units retreated without putting up much of a fight, and the Tigers virtually walked into the town. Almost all of the Nedunkerni army units reached Weli Oya intact the next morning, Wednesday.

The LTTE clearly didn't suffer many casualties at all at either Oddusudan or Nedunkerni, because they didn't even pause to lick their wounds.

In the predawn darkness on Wednesday, the LTTE launched yet another assault on the army-navy line, which was now closer to Olumadu.



The defenders made several tactical withdrawals during the day, moving even closer to Olumadu. But the line held strong, despite more attacks on Wednesday night.

More army reinforcements arrived on Thursday morning, and the defence ministry gave the order for the naval units to be withdrawn for a rest. The sailors had been fighting continuously for nearly three days, and were exhausted. More than a quarter of them were dead or missing, and many more wounded, and it did not make any sense to keep them in the frontline anymore.

The army replaced the sailors, and prepared to defend Olumadu and Mankulam, which was known to be the Tigers next objective.

The service commanders visited the Wanni that Thursday, to see for themselves the prevailing situation, and reorganize the defence. But it proved futile.

Hours before dawn on Friday, the LTTE attacked Olumadu.

The soldiers brought down a huge artillery barrage on the attackers, and as the sun rose, Kfir jets and MI-24 Hind helicopter gunships pounded the Tigers from the air.

But despite the furious resistance, the

Tigers shattered the army defences in several key places, and broke in.

At 9 a.m., the army retreated from Olumadu.

But the LTTE didn't stop there.

The fighting at Oddusudan and Olumadu, and the withdrawal of the Nedunkerni units to Weli Oya, had left Mankulam depleted of defenders. With the fall of Olumadu, Mankulam was nearly encircled, with only the main road to the south as an escape route.

Fighting a series of rearguard actions, the army withdrew from Mankulam, a town that had cost the lives of more than a thousand soldiers and seven months of bitter fighting during operation Jaya Sikuru.

At 3:30 p.m. on Friday, the LTTE took over Mankulam.

The army took up new defence lines at Kanagarayankulam, nearly 20 kilometers to the south.

How far the Tigers will advance, before their casualties force them to stop, remains to be seen, during the next few days. But in four days, they erased the gains of a year of operation Jaya Sikuru, and turned Anuruddha Ratwatte's dream of conquering the Wanni, into a nightmare.