



Areas under security Forces control: Before the attack, 1st November 99, 4th November 99, 6th November 99

Years of gains lost in days

LTTE's unceasing waves more strategic than political

Military gains that took years, months and weeks to accomplish, with large human and material sacrifices, were lost in a mere ten minutes last Monday. More losses followed in the days later.

That in short encapsulates the sad saga in the wilds of the Wannu this week, where one military victory followed another, in a tragic and sometimes comical drama.

The latest debacle is distinctly different from two other major ones - the July 1995 assault on the Mullaitivu Military Base and the attack on troop positions in Kilinochchi, in September 1998. If the lack of intelligence warnings about these devastating attacks caught the security forces unaware, this week's debacle was very ominous.

Early last week, a high ranking official of the Army's Directorate of Military Intelligence told a weekly security conference at the Ministry of Defence that LTTE planned to attack military fortifications at Oddusudan, "within the next four days." The warning was also backed up by the Directorate of Internal Intelligence (DII). It happened just two days after the warnings were sounded.

That is not all. Military Intelligence was seriously concerned about the information they received. An intelligence officer was tasked to brief the field commanders in the Wannu of the threat that loomed large over Oddusudan, the gateway to Mullaitivu, the nerve centre where the LTTE guerrilla campaign to create a homeland is being directed.

"Did these intelligence warnings intimate a politically ambitious VIP? Did he want them ignored on grounds that the warnings would discourage soldiers tasked for offensive operations? Did he say that such briefings were not necessary when operations were planned for? The talk was current but high-ranking officials remained light-headed."

And, as predicted, the attack came on Monday, 1st November.

What followed during the next few days will go down in military history as one of the darkest chapters in the ongoing separatist war. That it came just a little over six weeks to go for a Presidential election added to the confusion and heightened

concerns.

After Oddusudan was overrun, Tiger cadres hoisted their flag in the town area. Trucks later loaded military hardware and other war like material for transport to Mullaitivu. When they advanced further southwards, troops withdrew from the Nedunkerni defences. Within hours, guerrillas took control of the area, hoisted their flag and continued their southwards towards Well-Oya.

The troops reached Othiyamalai. Troops fell back from their positions. By Friday, with the help of additional troops including Commandos and Special Forces, they stalled their advance.

But panic caused some villagers in the frontier area to leave. Others were persuaded not to do so.

By Friday, groups of guerrillas had mounted assaults on Ampakamam, the north-east-most of a string of box-shaped territory, forcing troops north to withdraw. It is in this stretch that the troops extended north eastwards during the first phase of 'Operation Watershed' and attempted to proceed further during the second phase.

The move appeared to be a first step to encompass Puthukudiruppu, a key LTTE operational centre. Contrary to earlier reports in this column, only an extent of some nine square kilometres of territory was re-captured during 'Operation Watershed'.

On Friday, these gains were lost. Guerrillas blasted a bridge between Mankulam and Oddusudan, and attacked the defences that extended to Ampakamam.

As troops abandoned the area, Ampakamam fell. Later they directed their attack on the defences at Mankulam, the strategic northern junction in the Wannu which was captured during the 18 month long 'Operation Jaya Sikuri.' This town is the furthest point in Wannu under security forces control and a Civilian Safety Zone (CSZ) formed the passage between 'controlled' and 'uncontrolled' areas. Food supplies, movement of civilians and NGO representatives were through this CSZ.

After Oddusudan defences were over-run on Monday, Army shut down the CSZ and movements were stopped.

By Friday afternoon, ad-

formations of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) overran another military complex at Nedunkerni today, after taking control of the strategic town of Oddusudan yesterday. Nedunkerni town situated in the Pullyankulam-Mullaitivu highway and its surrounding areas have been brought under the control of the LTTE after intense fighting which continued for several hours last night.

With the Op Hq playing down the incident to a point that it seemed a major incident hardly occurred, the LTTE claims received wide play in TV networks, radio stations and newspapers worldwide. If the LTTE had regained a vast chunk of territory it lost almost an year ago, it had also gained maximum propaganda mileage by its media operations conducted from London - thousands of miles away from the frontlines of the Wannu - case of exploiting modern communications technology to milit.

When of the Op Hq of the Mod? There was silence on the first day and cryptic accounts thereafter. In a news release on Thursday reported 107 soldiers had died, there was one on Friday which said:

Ministry of Defence stands to be corrected in the figure of 107 killed in action as 89. 'Comical enough, a similar situation where a large figure was announced and later brought down to a lower number soon after the LTTE attack on Kilinochchi defences last year.

All this in the backdrop of a 19 month long censorship ban on media visits to battle areas. The only exceptions have been conducted tours, in these columns, to Sri Lanka and the world outside, the only source of information remains the Op Hq news releases.

The events in Wannu this week lays bare again how the amateurish media handling by incompetent officials have eroded the Government's credibility over the years and given the security forces a poorer image.

The wave of LTTE attacks from last Monday exposes the futile attempt to keep the Sri Lankan public in the dark by concealing the truth. This was whilst satellite television networks and the BBC radio including its Sinhala programme, Sandeshaya, projected the real picture and the gravity

of the situation.

And most Sri Lankans who had access to them were easily able to discern that claims in the news releases did not come nearer the truth.

Even the Colombo based diplomatic community who have become seriously concerned about the developments were worried about the unfolding events. Defence and Military Attachés representing several countries attended a briefing last Wednesday at the Ministry of Defence. Lt. Col. Jagath Dias, who briefed them admitted that Oddusudan has been 'cut off'. The fresh wave of attacks in the Wannu this week began at 11.30 p.m. on Monday, November 1. Here is how they unfolded.

A group of Tiger guerrillas, estimated to be around 400, had infiltrated security forces defences between Oddusudan (along the road from Mankulam to Mullaitivu). These guerrillas, described as specially trained cadres were the commando equivalents in the Army carried an assortment of weapons - Light Anti Tank Weapons (LAW), Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs), Machine Guns and small arms.

The defences were in different sectors. From the road along Olumadu for over a kilometre, 2GR troops manned it. It linked up with the Navy to extend to the box-shaped land mass upto Ampakamam.

Thereafter, 2 GR troops extended further until the Navy lines that encompassed like a cap around Oddusudan. At a point southwards, eighth battalion of the Vijayaba Infantry Regiment and the third battalion of the Sinha Regiment followed upto Nedunkerni.

Behind these defence lines lay the Tactical Headquarters of the 55 Division on the west. Op the east stood the headquarters of the Second Battalion of the Gajaba Regiment. Further down, on the eastern side lay the 563 Brigade Headquarters with artillery positions and the 8 VIR headquarters nearby.

Further westwards, the 563 Brigade, Kanakarayankulam lies the 56 Division. At 11.30 p.m., the guerrillas who infiltrated the defences began firing at the 2GR and 8VIR headquarters. That seemed a signal for the LTTE to commence artillery and mortar bombard-

EXCLUSIVE

SITUATION REPORT

BY IQBAL ATHAS

The Jungle Telegraph
By Alia

Lost track

One of the closely guarded secrets in the City is the arrival of Vasantha Raja, a one time Chairman of Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation and now Editor of the Tamil Guardian International.

The London based journalist is well known for his close links with the LTTE hierarchy.

If that has fuelled speculation about impending peace talks between Government and the LTTE, insiders say, the protection given to him by one security arm has heightened it.

Another security arm, completely unaware of this procedure, observed his movements closely only to lose track of him when he moved around.

Rejected pronto

A controversial top man in uniform, now retired, had a ride back last week.

Unlike paupers, the man who has a high flying lifestyle and aspired the ultimate in luxury living, wanted to become member of a leading social club, one with royal traditions.

When his application came up before the Committee, members raised eyebrows. They spoke a lot about his reputation and said entangling him would harm the Club's image. So the application was rejected pronto.

This time our man could not ask for more. What a strange twist!

Honda Ekek

The party of young businessmen including some new media moguls was under way at a sizzling restaurant when the news came on the telephone.

"The Army's 56 Division at Kanakarayankulam had fallen," a caller told Presidential Media Adviser, Sanath Gunatileke.

Soon, Mr Gunatileke and Fisheries Minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, were in a corner chatting away. The loud music played by a live band drowned their conversation.

When another guest later queried what they talked, a smiling Mr Rajapaksa declared "Okan Honda Ekek" (He is a good fellow). Sanath in the meanwhile was busy posing for photographs. He did not say "No" to those beautiful lassies who wanted to pose with him. The chief guest for the do, the Public Chief, Lucky Kodituwakula, was conspicuous by his absence.

Really mad

After the Army's 56 Division at Kanakarayankulam was seized by the LTTE, there was one officer who was really mad. He lost his squabbling out.

The floor was made of solid teak timber from trees cut to make way for safe mobility along roads.

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Years of gain . . .

(Cont. from Pg. 11)

Two battalions made an advance from Olumadu towards Odusuddan. Another battalion moved from Nedunkerni towards Odusuddan. Heavy mortar barrages and machine gun fire stalled the advance of the two columns. Both columns found the advance difficult and were ordered to call it off.

Security Forces Commander, Wann, Major General Wasantha Perera, then decided to bring in the Commando Regiment. Two squadrons moved out from Puliyanakulam, trekking through jungles to assist the 563 Brigade. Two more Squadrons set out through the same path headed for the 2GR headquarters.

The first two Squadrons reached the 563 Brigade and joined the men there. By then orders had arrived from the SF Headquarters, Wann for the 563 Brigade to immediately withdraw to Weli Oya. The other two Squadrons found it difficult to fight their way through to the 2GR headquarters.

The Special Forces Squadrons helped remove the Artillery pieces and moved them out. Later troops destroyed equipment. Some of the most valuable items including communications equipment, were loaded into a South African built Buffel armoured vehicle. They included secure (encrypted) communication sets and other sensitive items.

It was heading for the 56 Division Headquarters in Kanakarayanakulam when it

got stuck in soggy terrain. Efforts to proceed beyond became impossible. Troops from the 563 Brigade radioed for Air Force assistance to destroy the Buffel, now loaded with valuable military cargo. SLAF aircraft were engaging targets in other areas. The vehicle and the items fell into Tiger guerrilla hands.

The news brought about a complete radio silence for hours. Frequencies and call signs of command radio networks were changed due to fears that the LTTE, which captured the Buffel with sensitive military items, could now listen in. Air Force Kfir jets and Mi-24 helicopter gunships engaging guerrilla targets came under heavy fire. It became clear that the LTTE

had brought into use another Stand Off weapon - an unidentified anti-aircraft gun with air burst ammunition that could be adjusted to explode at various heights. This was how two Mi-24 helicopter gunships were damaged. By Wednesday afternoon, troops from the 563 Brigade led by Colonel Manoj Peiris, the Brigade Commander, and some 100 troops reached the 56 Division Headquarters at Kanakarayanakulam. The LTTE continued their thrust.

Coming under threat now were areas north of the Weli Oya Defence complex. By Thursday, troops in defences fell back to Gajabapura. Later, with the help of reinforcements that rushed in, defences were re-established. At least 25 guerrillas were killed in confrontations in this

sector where troops, backed by Commando and Special Forces Regiment, halted their advance.

If this came as relief to senior security officials, there was disturbing news from the other flanks. Guerrillas continued their thrust towards Olumadu, over-ran security forces held defences upto Ampakamam and later seized Mankulam. Thereafter, they continued their thrust over-running Kanakarayanakulam and moving towards Puliyanakulam.

High ranking military sources said Tigers had transported to Mullaitivu more than 60 tractor-tracked loads of military hardware from the Odusuddan and neighbouring areas. They included small arms, ammunitions, anti personnel mines, anti tank mines, mortar shells, two armoured cars, concertina wire and communications equipment among others. LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, had thrown in some of his "senior and trusted" confidantes to conduct "Operation Unceasing Waves 3". They were all led by Karuna, the one time Batticaloa "commander" and included Jeyam, Banu, Nagesh, Rabat, Theepan, Anton, Selvaraj and Balraj. Three leading women cadre leaders involved have been identified as Asha, Durga and Malathi. Besides the LTTE's "fighting units," civilians co-opted to other "units" were also deployed. They included Uthavi Padai (Help Force), Ellai Force (Border Force) and Grami Force (village force). Intelligence sources say more

than 1500 Tiger cadres took part in the attack on the Odusuddan defences and surrounding areas. Officials of a UN agency, now trapped in the Wann, reported that they had spoken to some LTTE leaders about the latest attacks. One of them had explained that the aim was to drive the security forces away to defence positions that existed before "Operation Jaya Sikuru".

An LTTE press release from London on Friday night claimed the "military establishment and the State have, for political reasons, refused permission to the ICR to accept the bodies of demised soldiers, the LTTE fighters have been cremating the dead soldiers..." Officials at the Op Hq of the Ministry of Defence had no comment. The LTTE attack on the Oddusuddan-Nedunkerni sector should not have come as a surprise to the Army. In fact Army intelligence warned about it. It was a matter of time before the LTTE had to respond to the Army strategy of inching its way into LTTE controlled territory through the Rivi Bla Rivirasa and Watershed series of operations. And in doing so the Oddusuddan-Nedunkerni sector was the obvious choice to recapture as this sector together with the Weli Oya sector posed a land threat to Mullaitivu from the west and the south. Should the Navy have laid a blockade off the shores of Mullaitivu then this area that is of strategic importance to the LTTE would have been encircled on three sides.

In the land battle the importance of the Mullaitivu area to the LTTE is because it is strategically adjacent and flanks the Army controlled area extending from Weli Oya through Vavuniya to Mankulam. Hence, the LTTE is able to apply pressure on the Army on this entire flank and tie the Army to maintain force levels in defence, which it could otherwise use in offensive operations elsewhere and in the Eastern Province. The Mullaitivu coast is important to the LTTE for many reasons. As a littoral, easily accessible to the main sea-lanes east of Sri Lanka, it is a convenient landing area for arms smuggling. The Mullaitivu coast is, also central to the Trincomalee-Jaffna sea routes and affords facilities for Sea Tigers to interdict Navy traffic off shore. The Mullaitivu area also supports a large population and is a source of human resources for the LTTE. For these reasons, the LTTE logically could not accept a situation, which bottles them in the Mullaitivu area in particular and the eastern Wann in general.

The timing of the LTTE offensive is aimed to maximise both tactical and political advantage. Tactically the LTTE by not offering significant resistance to the series of Army operations that nibbled into territory controlled by them compelled the Army to extend their resources in defence. They, at the same conserved their manpower without committing them into combat piece-meal. To compel the enemy to extend their resources is an age old and

well tested tactic in guerrilla war and not an innovational strategy by the LTTE.

It is unlikely that the Army fell for that ruse. The senior officers are too experienced and trained for that. But the military was compelled to over extend themselves to satisfy political enthusiasm and the bloated ego of a politician in uniform is not a matter of conjecture. Certainly, political trumpeting each time extra kilometers were added to areas of military control lent more than faint credibility to the probability that political exigencies overrode military pragmatism in the planning of operational strategy. Compounding the disadvantages brought about by thinning resources on the ground are the limitations to operations imposed by the monsoon weather conditions. The mobility of tanks and armoured vehicles and the movement of heavy artillery, which in the jungle terrain was always problematical, became further restricted by soggy ground conditions. The possession of tanks and armoured vehicles has been of great advantage to the Army.

The inability to now exploit this advantage due to adverse monsoon conditions obviously is bonus to the LTTE. There is little doubt that the monsoon factor would have influenced the military timing of this offensive. These basic realities should have prompted the military to strengthen their defenses and to organise themselves to overcome the disadvantages imposed by ground and weather. That the Army's

defenses were so easily overpowered opens grave questions on the state of military preparedness, plans and leadership.

That the LTTE offensive has in a short time penetrated in depth to threaten Puliyanakulam and isolate Mankulam exposes weaknesses in military planning which require immediate correction. In the backdrop of Prabhakaran's birthday in November and the impending Presidential elections, LTTE actions, in hindsight, amply indicate that the timing of their initiatives, military or political are not haphazardly done but done with a sense of significance. This offensive is no different.

It is unlikely that this offensive was launched with the purpose of swaying the Sinhala electorate against the incumbent government. What matters to Prabhakaran is not which party or personality is in power. What matters to him is his position to call the shots in power politics. With the success he has achieved this time, he has militarily staked his claim to be the leader of the Tamils without running for election. His message to the merging political scenarios in Sri Lanka and to other Tamil parties is loud and clear.

The political fallout of this military failure is one aspect. Its military significance is another. The military aspect is complementary to the political programme in that the Security Forces must maintain the writ of government. Failure to do so weakens the political

position. This is not to subscribe to the debate of a military solution versus a political negotiation but rather to state the obvious that the instruments of law and order must maintain the writ of the State.

It is in that context that the military losses in the Wann have to be considered and those responsible for it, both politically and militarily, held accountable. Too many military debacles have been swept under the carpet. Courts of Inquiries have been appointed and these proceedings have not seen the light of day. Some of those who are said to have been stricken have risen to dizzy heights. None appear to have been penalised. It is not just the military who have to take responsibility but the political establishment as well.

The military are doing a commendable job inspite of some set backs. Political exigencies should not outweigh military realities. However, unless those accountable are held responsible, the rot will remain. The Government owes it to the Country to inquire and correct the causes that led to this military reversal. Even more, the Government and the nation owes it to the brave men and women in the security forces that debacles of this nature will not happen again. Equally important is the imperative need for politicians in uniform to desist from continuing their adventures for political gain using the brave men and women from the security forces as their pawns.