

Hope and anxiety - Jaffna after

by Prof. V. Suryanarayan

THE prolonged violent conflict between the Sinhalese dominated government, in Colombo and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) entered a new phase with the capture of the Jaffna peninsula by the Sri Lankan Army.

It is a stunning defeat for the LTTE, the worst setback since the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) bottled it up in the jungles of Vavuniya in the late 1980s. Its war machine has been torn asunder. The peninsula contained its training schools and factories producing mortars and mines.

What is more, the fall of Jaffna has exploded the myth of the invincibility of the LTTE, a myth cleverly orchestrated by its propaganda machinery both in Sri Lanka and abroad.

This article is based on impressions gathered during a recent ten-day visit to Sri Lanka. I was able to exchange ideas with political leaders in the ruling People's Alliance and in the opposition, senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of the diplomatic community, academics, journalists, trade unionists and representatives of non-governmental organisations.

I was able to visit Jaffna and talk to students, teachers, government officials and ordinary citizens in addition to senior army commanders in Vavuniya. I visited a refugee camp run with assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In Thandikulam, I spoke to people awaiting army clearance to go to LTTE controlled areas and also local army commanders.

The LTTE has made tall claims about its growing military capabilities and efficient administrative setup. Anton Balasingham, the organisation's spokesman, asserted during the course of a conversation with a team of academics from Harvard University in March 1995. "At that time (during the IPKF operation), we were a small force and we could not put up a massive resistance. Now we will fight back. The LTTE the army and civilians will turn the peninsula into a killing field (emphasis added). Balasingham added "We are running a government here. We have established an administrative system, a de facto government, we have a police, we have an army..... thousands and thousands of civilians are participating, not the LTTE alone".

The truth is that during Operation Riviresa III, when the Sri Lankan Army captured Vadamarachchi, the LTTE did not offer any military resistance. The LTTE administrative setup tumbled like a pack of cards. What is more significant, unlike the IPKF (a temporary phenomenon with limited objectives), the Sri Lankan Army is going to stay put in Jaffna peninsula.

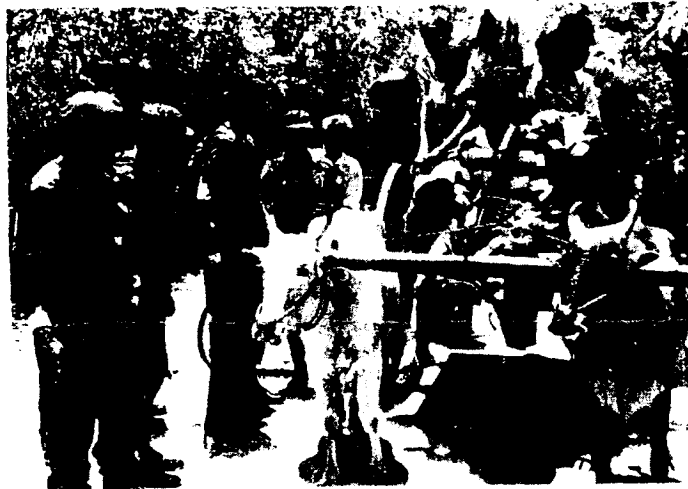
In fact, the military setback of the LTTE should not be a matter of surprise to keen Sri Lanka watchers. For whenever the LTTE has had to wage a conventional battle, it has suffered serious setbacks. In May 1987, when Lalith Athulathmudali launched Operation Vadamarachchi LTTE guerrillas were virtually fleeing from the battlefield. Jaffna would have easily fallen to Sri Lankan Army had not New Delhi intervened at that juncture. It was New Delhi's determination not to permit Colombo to have a military victory which came as a godsend to the Tigers. It led to the signing of the India-Sri Lanka Agreement and the induction of the peace keeping force.

When the IPKF started cracking down on the LTTE in October 1987, Jaffna fell into Indian Army hands in 11 days. In early 1991, when V. Prabhakaran wanted to capture the strategic Elephant Pass, the LTTE lost nearly 600 of its trained cadres. It is interesting to note that the LTTE scrupulously avoided military confrontation in Pooneryn, the scene of its spectacular victory in November 1993.

It deserves highlight that the Tigers are pastmasters in guerrilla warfare. But Prabhakaran does not have the human and material resources to build a conventional army.

A few significant features of the LTTE are worth recounting. A number of LTTE veterans have died on the battlefield during the three Eelam wars - Pulendran, Kumarappa, Kittu, Victor, Radha, Santho-Sham, Charles Anthony, Akila and others. A few such as Mahathaya have been killed by Prabhakaran as "traitors". Like Saturn which kills its own progeny, the LTTE has swallowed its own children.

the LTTE reverses



The Lankan Army in Jaffna: From ceremonial soldiers to professional army.

Unlike Prabhakaran and Balraj, most of the regional commanders- Soosai Shan-kar, Jothi, Kapil Amman, Bosco, Soornam and Karuna joined the movement after 1983. Whether the second generation has the fighting abilities and dedication of its predecessors, only time can tell. Lacking in manpower, the LTTE is compelled to recruit boys and girls of tender age.

What is more, this baby brigade is not given rigorous training before being sent out to the front. A lack of committed and dedicated cadres could turn out to be the Achilles' heel of the LTTE in the days to come.

Surprise

The element of surprise, which was the hallmark of the LTTE attacks and which enabled it to inflict innumerable casualties and great damage on civilians and the armed forces alike, is slowly getting eroded. Thus in Welioy (Manal Aru in Tamil) in Mullaitivu district, at the end of July 1995 the Sri Lankan Army was well prepared for a Tiger attack.

With the LTTE walking into the Army trap, the guerrillas were moved down by machine guns. (According to Colombo, 300 LTTE guerrillas were

killed). According to the Jaffna University for Human Rights, the LTTE is holding more than 4,000 prisoners in conditions similar to "Nazi and Stalinist prison complexes". Intolerance and violence are spreading to countries where there are Sri Lankan refugees.

D. B. S. Jayaraj, the well-known Sri Lankan journalist and editor of 'muncharie', has vividly described how the "finer traditions of journalism have been suppressed by the neo-fascist intolerant organisation claiming to fight for the Tamil cause" (Frontline, May 31, 1996). The dastardly assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, allegedly by the LTTE, has created a sense of revulsion in India. India especially Tamil Nadu, has yet to recover from the calamity. As Prof. Bryan Pfaffenberger points out, "whatever the LTTE involvement in this and other murders, they only help to further the notion of Prabhakaran as a deeply paranoid, very dangerous megalomaniac."

President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and her astute Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kudrigamar, have convinced the outside world that it was the intransigence of Prabhakaran that has led to the present impasse. The LTTE suprema's decision to call off the talks, when many Tamils believed that a

All those interested in the return of normalcy to Jaffna should take immediate steps to break the communication barrier. The people of the peninsula have no access to information. A few months ago, the University of Jaffna organised a discussion on the devolution proposals, but without access to the relevant documents.

negotiated settlement could be worked out, hardened the mind-set of the political leadership in Colombo.

In an interview with Schekhar Gupta of 'India Today' (May 1, 1996), the Sri Lankan president gave expression to her anger and indignation: "They (LTTE) are the most ruthless and most effective guerrilla organisation in the twentieth century. We tried our best, keeping in mind that we were dealing with a merciless megalomaniac, who killed every single person who was opposed to him. The LTTE was nurtured, fed, financed and armed by Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. Yet Prabhakaran decided to bump off Rajiv. I am personally very much aware that if he did not get from me what he wanted, I would be first person in his hit list".

The Sri Lankan government has launched a highly effective worldwide campaign to counter false and misleading LTTE propaganda. As a result, many human rights groups in Europe and the United States are revising their earlier policies of whole hearted support to the LTTE. What is more, according to Lakshman Kudrigamar, the governments of Malaysia, Switzerland, Canada and Germany are taking active steps to counter pro LTTE agitation, soon France and Australia may follow suit.

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The LTTE has also stepped up its disinformation campaign. In an article in the official publication 'Inside Report', Adele Ann Balasingham has tried to project the LTTE as the "aggrieved party". To quote

her: "The Tamil nation looks upon Western world to take constructive measures to encourage both the LTTE and the government to seek peaceful ways to resolve the conflict. The LTTE front organisations are planning a series of conferences to mobilise international opinion on the platform of "peace and justice".

V. Rudhrakumar, political advisor of the LTTE international unit in the U.S., is emerging as one of the main advocates of the LTTE cause. In a conference held in Norway in February 1996, he pleaded for "moral support of the international community for the victim of aggression". He added that in Sri Lanka, "we are witnessing phenomenon in which the victim is brutalised, then blamed".

According to Rudhrakumar, the first step for a negotiated settlement is that "the government should recognise the LTTE as the sole legitimate representative of the Tamils and start to learn to deal with them". He pleaded that the international community should "reconsider the attitude towards LTTE's legitimate campaign and find a new course of action."

In retrospect, the LTTE strategy of forcing the people of Jaffna, to leave their homes so that the Sri Lankan Army would march into a ghost town has backfired. It has led to the alienation of the people. All through the years of change and crisis, bloodshed and fire, the people of Jaffna have remained in their homes. The 'Tamil Times' has characterised the forced exodus as "Rwanda type enforced evacuation.... leading to a humanitarian disaster of catastrophic proportions.... Never before have so many people at such short notice been so cruelly uprooted from their homes and compelled to turn themselves over night into refugees".

The agony and suffering the people went through have led to a perceptible change in their attitude towards the LTTE. Ordinary people in Jaffna, whom I spoke to during my recent visit, feel that the LTTE has used them as a 'tool' to advance its narrow political and military objectives. Still worse, when they returned home, they found many of their personal belongings missing, all equipment from the laboratories of Jaffna University had been removed.

When I asked the faculty and students whether it was the Sri Lankan Army which indulged in this act of vandalism, they gave an instructive reply: "No these were removal by the LTTE, even before the Army entered the university campus."

Over the years, the LTTE has created a conformist society in Jaffna and has stifled all forms of dissent. But even a worm will turn. The objective reality in Jaffna today leads to one conclusion. We must draw a clear distinction between the aspirations of the Tamil people and the objectives of the LTTE. The young boys and girls in the Jaffna Hindu College and the Jaffna Hindu Ladies College, looking smart and pretty in their clean uniforms, are extremely happy that they are back in their classrooms.

The Sri Lankan Army is slowly but steadily emerging as a professional organisation vastly improved in numbers and equipped with sophisticated weapons. In the early years of independence, the Army was a ceremonial force, providing guard of honour services to visiting dignitaries and holding march pasts on independence day.

The first major threat to the Sri Lankan political system was encountered in 1971, when the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) raised the banner of revolt. Colombo could not cope with the consequent security threat. Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike approached friendly countries for immediate assistance. India promptly sent five frigates to seal off the approach to Colombo. Indian troops also guarded the Katunayake Airport during the first and second Eelam wars and also in tackling the JVP. The Army was accused of gross violations of human rights. To add to Colombo's discomfiture, there were large scale desertions from the Sri Lankan Army (over 15,000 in a combined strength of 90,000 deserted, some with arms).

Balance

According to the military balance, 1993-94, the total armed forces of Sri Lanka number 1,10,800, of which the Army comprises 90,000, the Navy 10,100 and the Air Force 10,700. The Army today is definitely more combat-oriented. The Army, the Navy and the Air Force are better equipped. Arms purchases have been diversified, the major suppliers being Israel, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, China, the United States, South Korea, Pakistan and Indonesia.

In contrast to the pre-1987 period, when the internationalisation of the ethnic conflict led to severe strains in India-Sri Lanka relations, there is today greater appreciation in New Delhi of Colombo's needs and compulsions.

(Contd on page 8)

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Hope and anxiety...

(Contd from page 6)

The present phase of conflict started on a bad note for Colombo. The LTTE destroyed two naval vessels in Trincomalee and shot down two Air Force planes by using anti-aircraft guns. Gradually the tide began to turn. A senior brigadier informed me that after detailed discussions, the Sri Lankan Army decided to adopt a fresh strategy. Under Ranasinghe Premadasa, the main objective was to consolidate the position in the East, to prove that the LTTE did not have the support of the mixed population - Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese living in those areas.

But in that process the LTTE could strengthen its stranglehold in the Jaffna Peninsula. Col. Anurudha Ratwatte adopted a different course of action by striking at the LTTE bastion, the Jaffna peninsula. The LTTE played into Army hands by forcing the people to flee from their homes. Had the people remained in Jaffna, the civilian casualties would have been considerable.

The new strategy involved the concentration of large numbers of forces in Jaffna peninsula. The Army therefore had to close down several camps in the eastern sector. The LTTE has taken advantage of the new situation and has fanned out in these areas. The army commanders are, however, confident that once they redeploy the forces in the East, the LTTE will have to withdraw into the jungles.

Another special aspect of the Sri Lankan situation needs to be highlighted. In the Indian situation, New Delhi has been able to insulate Kashmir from the parts of the country. The LTTE, on the other hand, has time and again shown its capacity to take the struggle to the capital. On October 20, 1995, LTTE commandos, disguised in army outfit, set ablaze two major oil storage tanks in Colombo. In another act of savagery, on January 31, 1996, the Central Bank complex was destroyed by a truck carrying explosives drive by a suicide bomber.

The conduct of the Army has thus far been good and this fact has boosted its image in the Jaffna peninsula. The people in Jaffna, young and old, feel very happy that the Army does not disturb their day-to-day lives. But the present situation is riddled with several imponderables. The Army is engaged today in several tasks, including the distribution of essential goods to the people. And the LTTE, whose small presence is admitted by the Army, will try to create friction between the Army and the civilians, a strategy which it cleverly pursued against the IPKF. Colombo must give top priority to the restoration of civil administration so that the Army could concentrate on its legitimate task of combating the LTTE guerrillas and the maintenance of law and order.

The Tiger has been mauled, but not yet incapacitated. Anticipating reverses, the LTTE has moved its trained cadres and weapons to Kilinochchi. The Sea Tigers have shifted their headquarters to Mullaitivu. Prabhakaran has reconciled himself to long drawn out guerrilla warfare. He is convinced that the Sinhalese leadership will not give a fair deal to the Tamils and that the Sri Lankan Army will soon get alienated from the people.

As far as the Army is concerned, its immediate objective will be to sustain the military pressure on

the tigers and open a land route from Elephant Pass to Vavuniya through Tiger infested areas. The port in Point Pedro would soon be put into operation to facilitate the movement of men and goods from Colombo to the North. If the Army's calculations go through, the conflict with the LTTE will soon become a "low intensity conflict" which can easily be managed.

New battle

Colombo has to wage a new battle in the Jaffna peninsula, a battle for the hearts and minds of the people. For the first time in recent history, people no longer consider the Tigers their 'saviour'. Weary of war, having suffered equally at the hands of the "oppressors" and the "liberators", people yearn for peace. An important component of the peace offensive should be a political settlement which confers maximum autonomy to the Tamil areas, but within the framework of a united Sri Lanka.

Unfortunately the devolution package is slowly getting embroiled in competitive Sinhala politics. From this side of the Palk Straits, one hopes that Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickremesinghe - two outstanding leaders who are not only non-communal but also committed to a peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict - will sink their differences, work out a Sinhala consensus and rebuild the foundations of a plural society on the basis of the Chandrika proposals. As Noam Chomsky pointed out in a different context. "We don't know that honest and dedicated effort will be enough to solve or mitigate our problems. However, we can be quite confident that lack of such efforts will spell disaster".

What are the prospects of a democratic alternative to the LTTE emerging in the Jaffna peninsula? I tried to probe the minds of the people on this crucial issue, but could not get a definitive answer. A few pro-LTTE diehards characterised Colombo's gestures as a "farce", they are convinced that the LTTE will sooner or later stage a come back. The overwhelming majority does not want the non-LTTE militant groups the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and the Eelam Research Organisation (EROS) to fill the political vacuum.

They feel that such a situation will lead to conflicts among various groups and they will get caught in the crossfire. As for a possible role for the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the elders have high respect and regard for M. Sivasithamparam, but the youth feel that TULF deserted them in a moment of crisis and, therefore, it cannot play any meaningful role. I asked: "Will a new leadership emerge from among the people?" There was no answer. People are still groping in the dark, there is hope, at the same time it is mixed with anxiety.

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Colombo should permit the free circulation of all

newspapers and magazines. All newspapers and magazines from Tamil Nadu should be sent to Jaffna. The proposal for the reconstruction of the Jaffna library should be heartily endorsed. Tamil Nadu must contribute the maximum in the form of books, journals, micro-films and equipment.

On June 3, 1996 the Sri Lankan government submitted a proposal to all foreign missions in Colombo: the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Programme for the Jaffna peninsula. The programme includes relief and resettlement and the reconstruction of the economic infrastructure, the social infrastructure, productive sectors and supporting services. The estimated cost of the programme is 1,4827 million Sri Lankan rupees; the foreign assistance component works out to 6,590 million Sri Lankan rupees.

Response

The government of India must positively respond to Colombo's request and provide relief and assistance which will go a long way in rebuilding trust and confidence and restoring peace and stability in the peninsula. At the same time, New Delhi should point out to Colombo that Sri Lanka should not equate India with Nepal, Pakistan, Japan, Germany and the US. India's stakes in Sri Lanka are far greater.

Immediate arrangements should be made for the visit to Jaffna of a team of Indian specialists who can identify areas in which India can make a meaningful contribution. India, for example, should provide the much needed equipment for the Jaffna hospital, rebuild the laboratories in Jaffna University and supply buses and trucks for transport. India should immediately extend a hand of friendship in Jaffna's trust with destiny.

While speaking to the bright young boys of the Jaffna Hindu College, I was reminded of a moving passage in Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography. In the course of a vacation in Ceylon, along with Kamala and Indira in 1931, Nehru visited Jaffna, where he had an encounter with some teachers and students: "One little incident lingers in my memory, it was near Jaffna, I think. The teachers and boys of a school stopped our car and said a few words of greeting. The ardent eager faces of the boys stood out, and then one of their number came to me, shook hands with me, and without question or argument said, "I will not falter".

"That bright young face with shining eyes; full of determination, is imprinted in my mind. I do not know who he was: I have lost trace of him. But somehow, I have the conviction that he will remain true to his word and will not falter when he has to face life's difficult problems."

We in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, should have an interest to see that this young boy does not once again become cannon fodder in the ethnic conflict, that he does not become a forcible conscript in the 'baby brigade' of the LTTE; that on the contrary, he is provided with opportunities so that he could blossom into another Ananda Coomaraswamy. (Frontline)

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