

IPKF order of battle . (1989, Oct 15). India Today.



Map by B.K. SRIPATNA

sets and other equipment, documents and freshly cooked food for over 150 men. The Gurkhas too swooped down on Topimalai only after its occupants had fled.

Both operations are now the subject of intense debate. Each camp was a major LTTE hide-out and, if the army had been reached before the Tigers fled, a large body of rebel manpower would have been trapped. But you can't surprise with a 100-odd infantrymen rummaging through the forest.

Surprise might have been possible if the IPKF had heli-landed commandos. Yet again, the problem is you cannot land troops unless you know the exact location of the camp. Experts say that requires modern—but easily available—infra-red imaging equipment mounted on aircraft if not satellites. At night, human habitations in a damp jungle radiate heat waves that infra-red sensors can pick up.

This is how the US has been picking out cocaine units hidden in the Colombian forests. Experts feel Indian forces need to acquire such equipment—in the post-Sri Lanka phase it could be invaluable in the jungles of the Indian north-east, or even Punjab's Mand swamps covered with elephant grass. The problem, however, does not end with infra-red sensors. "Even when you know the location of the camps you can't land troops since the jungles provide no opening for the helicopters. What do you do? Defoliate?" asks an officer. That left army planners inevitably looking the Agent Orange syndrome in the eye.

Many feel that the most important outcome of the Sri Lanka experience has been that it provided a baptism in fire for an army in which, to use soldiers' lexicon, subalterns had grown into colonels without ever hearing a shot fired in anger. "We've had great training. My boys are no longer afraid of the bullet," says Major-General Bhalla. Whether a thousand dead and 3,000 wounded was an affordable price for that or not is another matter altogether.

—SHEKHAR GUPTA in Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa

people were massacred in two days. This was in apparent retaliation to a rebel attack killing nine family members of soldiers. Kandy's ruthless police chief Premadasa Udgam-pola said an anti-jvp group, Eagles of Central Hills, claimed responsibility for the killings. But he added that though he opposed anyone taking the law into his own hands, the "end-result" was "good" as 80 per cent of those killed were jvp sympathisers. A day later, a powerful car-bomb blast in Gampaha left two dead and 25 wounded. Next morning 32 bodies, many with burning tyres still around their necks, were found in the district.

All this took away from the gains Premadasa could have expected from the all-party conference. In any case, the jvp

Also, a key question is: what will happen in the north-east after the IPKF withdraws? LTTE sympathisers say the group is changing its ways and may now join the democratic process. Yet there are suspicions. Said North-Eastern Provincial Government Chief Minister Varatharaja Perumal: "The Tigers don't change their spots (*sic*). They are fascists and won't accept a democratic dispensation." His suspicions arise from the fact that the LTTE has threatened to launch action against the EPRLF from October 1.

For several months EPRLF cadres have been trained and armed by the IPKF, which has used them to get intelligence about the LTTE. Clashes have already broken out between the two groups. The IPKF and other officials concede a showdown between the LTTE and the pro-India groups is inevitable. Says Iqbal, the Jaffna town organiser for the EPRLF: "We have no illusion about what will happen once the IPKF leaves."



EPRLF cadres: armed by IPKF

did not attend, and Premadasa detractors likened the conference to a wedding sans the bride. The jvp in turn called for a civil disobedience campaign. It asked people not to pay taxes, buy bus and train tickets and postage stamps "in the national interest". Wijeratne admitted the jvp had burnt seven tea and rubber factories and 88 post offices since the call. He said the jvp was trying to strangle the economy.

Premadasa's hope that his security forces can compel the jvp to the negotiating table, as the IPKF did with the LTTE, may well boomerang. With Sri Lankan forces and pro-government vigilantes killing innocents, more people are driven to the jvp.

That is why even while talking of peace, all sides are preparing for the next round. The Tigers are indulging in a kind of tactical thrust-and-parry to gain positional advantage in the post-IPKF phase. And the IPKF is busy arming EPRLF cadres even as the group forcibly brings in scores of Tamil conscripts each day.

Indian intelligence agencies have for some time secretly run a major operation importing arms: mainly Kalashnikovs, rocket-launchers and grenades of Soviet/Chinese origin from Afghanistan to arm pro-Indian Tamil groups. That and the desire for vengeance will ensure that the real battle for supremacy in the Tamil belt will begin only after the last Indian soldier leaves for home.

—SHEKHAR GUPTA with P. JAYARAM in Colombo