

THE SUNDAY TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22, 1995

NEWS

Black morning at Kolonnawa

Lankadeepa photographer, Surahimala Perera was one of the first journalists to visit the Kolonnawa oil facility after it was set ablaze by LTTE terrorists and witnessed the shoot out between the security forces and the terrorists. He shares the horrifying experience with *The Sunday Times* readers.

Many Kolonnawa residents were fleeing the area on Friday clutching bundles containing whatever they were able to collect of their possession.

As we wended our way among the panic-stricken crowd we moved towards the blazing flames from the oil storage tanks that had been set ablaze, that Friday morning.

It was 1.30 a.m. and within minutes newsmen were at the scene, questioning eye witnesses and photographers were busy clicking their cameras at the scene.

A sharp crack, like that of gunfire was followed by a shouted order rending the air.

"Get down!" a soldier yelled as yet another tank burst into flames. All the journalists, flung themselves flat alongside the Kolonnawa rail tracks.

Then a rapid exchange of gun-

fire was heard amidst the confusion suffocating smoke from the flames and a soldier nearby shouted once again asking us to take cover in a building nearby. It was as we ran for cover that George Arnie of the BBC was hit by a bullet and fell. The rest of us made our way through the commotion.

As soldiers fell one after the other the battle grew more intense. A brave Army Captain directing his men could be seen in action in one of my photographs.

Kamani Alwis of the 'Dinamina' newspaper was also one of those reporters who showed great courage at the time making notes on what she saw as she moved around. Later there was a lull in the fighting and 20 bodies lay nearby. Parked vehicles had been destroyed, including an Army bomb disposal

squad truck. Fire engines and several other vehicles were also badly damaged.

For a brief ten minutes all was silent before we heard shouts in the direction of the main road saying, "We are from the STF, don't shoot..." But this was followed by a burst of gunfire apparently coming from a group of men dressed in military garb.

When the gunfight ended soldiers began to remove the dead and the wounded and fire brigade trucks began to come in.

We made our way out and we saw scattered body parts, pools of blood and charred vehicles.

As we joined the crowds going towards Dematagoda, we saw two large pools of blood. We were told the fleeing terrorists had shot two people there.

Close to a bank in Dematagoda a large crowd had gathered. They were surrounding the two armed men who were firing all over as they were fleeing. The terrorists were captured. But before we could creep in amongst the crowds, the security forces whisked them away.



Grim scene: an RPG recovered from the lorry