

Govt. must probe national disaster at Pooneryn. (1993, November 28). *The Sunday times.*

Govt. must probe national disaster at Pooneryn

By The Sunday Times Defence Correspondent

The stock of the Pooneryn disaster has to be assessed, but only the remains of the valiant servicemen returned to their homes in an attempt to console the grief of the human tragedy at Pooneryn.

There are no flames or embers of a funeral pyre nor the martial ceremonies of military funeral to honour the dead, but only the remains of the valiant servicemen returned to their homes in an attempt to console the grief of the human tragedy at Pooneryn.

This is the nature of war and a nation has to suffer, as do the loved ones of those dead or injured, in silence.

To the Government, the security forces and the administration, the echoes of the Pooneryn disaster, however, reverberate. For them the immediate damage control has been executed and stock taking of how and why now preoccupies their minds.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, in outlining the events at Pooneryn in Parliament said an inquiry into the debacle would be held by the Army Commander. He raised some pertinent questions which that inquiry would look into.

Some of these questions relate to the effectiveness of overall military planning and omissions if any. This implies that the top executive of the Army, the Army Commander and his command mechanism may be open to be faulted.

For instance the questions raised by Premier Wickremesinghe with regard to whether the delay in sending reinforcements was the result of the non-existence of contingency planning, or whether the long defence lines, lacked depth, or intelligence was not needed to be surely within the responsibilities of the higher direction of the war.

In such circumstances, some military analysts and experts in the military field, ask whether a court of inquiry appointed by the Army Commander, in other words a military court with serving officers, would in fact find fault with their own system, superiors and colleagues.

In cases of events of lesser disaster and lesser dimension, the answer, they say, is 'yes' for the integrity of the senior officers are not at all under question, even if it means admitting grave shortcomings. That is not at issue.

The question here is that the Pooneryn debacle is a national disaster both in terms of tragic human losses and the heavy loss of resources. This is the very basis on which national minded people in various organisations including social clubs are calling off fire-Christmas dances and other tamasha.

Hence an inquiry is not something that should necessarily be internal to the Army, Navy or Air Force. But in the total context of the magnitude of the disaster, and the possible answerability for it, any inquiry should not be departmental but appointed by the Government, say these analysts and experts.

They argue that it is the security forces which have to be assured that the Government is concerned with the conduct of the war, not merely to provide a budgetary allocation and political patronage to the war effort. They add that the man with a rifle in his hands who sticks his neck out in the cause of a political Sri Lanka must be assured of the correctness of the political and military decisions for

Commercial aspects of war are replete with graft and profit

In the wake of a war, sale of arms is big business. The receiving of commissions is even comparatively bigger. This is the vicious game. Human frailty makes men susceptible to selfishness and personal gain. The commercial aspect of war is replete with graft and profit made by the very perpetrators of war.

Fortunately, we in Sri Lanka are not in the same category as in some other countries. There is no gauding in the fact that a nation should be on its eternal guard against those who exploit human tragedies for their favour.

Tactical requirements

Following the debacle of "Operation Val Desil" and the Pooneryn disaster, the losses of which are said to be over Rs. 350 million, arms dealers are already taking wing to Sri Lanka.

Last week, the copy of a confidential document which sets out some of the requirements made by top brass was circulating around the arms dealer community. Local agents were faxing them to their principals. Some are already heading for Colombo.

The purchase of the wide array listed would entail billions of rupees. Needless to say it will mean millions in commissions. The items include 30 South African type Buffets, 26 T55 tanks, 40 TV 432 tracked armoured personnel vehicles, ten Salgulin armoured cars and ten Saracen armoured cars.

But whether the Government will give the go-ahead for these purchases by accepting the recommendations is still uncertain. Some advisers to the Government say what has been lost in the battle field should be replaced.

But they argue that it is imperative to make a studied evaluation of equipment needs vis a vis organisational requirements to meet short to middle term tactical requirements before additional equipment, other than replacement items are ordered. "Additions without studied evaluation will be ad hoc, and will only enrich arms merchants and their cohorts", said one of them.

Whilst the arms dealers are busy to secure their Christmas bonanza the LTTE, riding on the euphoria of a Pooneryn victory "was busy making preparations for another offensive. Following reports of build-ups in some areas, a series of counter measures were being put into effect.

In the past few days President D.B. Wijetunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have been personally overseeing measures to ensure the security apparatus in the North is strengthened to prevent any major debacles in the future.

A significant development in this regard is the entry into the northern theatre of war of Major General Gery de Silva, Chief of Staff, whose term (due to expire on December 31) has been extended by President for another year.

In addition to his duties as Chief of Staff, President Wijetunga has also assigned to Major General de Silva the task of handling all anti-terrorist operations in the North. He will be in overall charge of the northern sector where GOC is Major General Rohan Daluwatte.

President Wijetunga directed Major General Silva to fly to the North and make a personal study of the prevailing situation. Last Thursday he flew to the Pooneryn Military



Base in the company of Brigadier Sri Lal Weerasuriya and Air Commodore Anselm Peris, Director Operations of the Sri Lanka Air Force. They conferred with high ranking officials and obtained a first-hand account of the ongoing situation and difficulties encountered.

Already Major General Silva has gone into action by launching several measures.

For obvious reasons one cannot talk of the measures that have gone into force. However, it is relevant to mention such steps also covered the Main Military Base at Pooneryn, while the Pooneryn defences were under siege.

There were no details last week of how this happened. On November 12, an alert soldier on a clearing patrol proceeding along the Myliddy side of the base had spotted a disturbed patch of grass, something that showed that there had been heavy movement over it.

The soldier walked towards the spot and took a few steps forward. There seated on the ground besides weapons were a group who very much resembled soldiers. They were the latest issue uniforms and insignia. "Ogolla Mona Unit Ekeenda?" (Which Unit are you from?) asked the soldier. There was no response. He walked back and told this to his officer. The young officer promptly went with his men and challenged the group. When he realised who they were, he and his men opened fire. Three terrorists fell dead as others ran for cover. Two soldiers were wounded.

That triggered off an immediate search. Troops engaged another group on the EDLs east of Achevely. When the confrontation ended, 21 terrorists were shot dead. One group that escaped after a fierce gun battle shot two soldiers dead. Two more soldiers who were bravely pursuing the retreating terrorists met with their untimely death by falling into a well.

The alertness of that soldier saved a disaster of Pooneryn proportions. The plans of the infiltrators was not to just damage fuel dumps. They had come with sophisticated bombing devices to attack aircraft which were taking off from there for sorties over Pooneryn. They were also wanting to attack the transport planes that came for refuelling.

The security forces seized a wide array of sophisticated weaponry the infiltrators brought in. It seemed that they had been in the area for several hours before a chance detection of one group.

One soldier who identified the dead body of a terrorist said he had seen him many hours before. He had smiled at him thinking he was a colleague. The terrorist had smiled back.

In Colombo, panic caused by rumours led to some tension. For some weeks now, both the security forces and the Police have been told to be mindful of a possible attempt by the terrorists to cause chaos. Amidst this came reports that some groups were planning to attack certain specific targets under the pretext of being service personnel.

Although there was no hard confirmation of this, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe did not take chances. He directed maximum precautions. Defence Secretary, Hamilton Wanasinghe ordered a red alert.

Inspector General of Police, Frank de Silva, alerted Police stations countrywide. In the city, Deputy Inspector General A.S. Senarathne ordered his men to crack down hard on mischief.

The red alert came when the Ministry of Defence has been taking a series of other measures. Its Civil Security Division on November 17 sent out a circular to managers of tourist hotels. Instructions have been given in this circular to tighten security during weddings, and other functions. This is what the circular says:

You are advised to implement the following procedure when receiving gift parcels from guests, attending functions / receptions held in the hotel.

(i) All parcels, gifts received to be subjected to surveillance by an explosives detector.

(ii) The identity of donor to be established beyond doubt, his full name, address, NIC No. to be noted in a list which should be maintained in duplicate and authenticated. Original to be handed over to the host, and a duplicate copy to be filed of record for possible future reference.

(iii) A gift receiving counter to be established and sited well away from the hall where the reception is held.

(iv) The counter for receiving parcels should always be manned by two or more experienced Security Guards-Of guests at the reception includes VVIPs a member of his own security to be in attendance at the counter for additional surveillance.

(v) Personnel manning the counter to be specially briefed on the following point in respect of IED's.

(a) Unevenness of parcel to be suspect.

(b) If excessive in size, to treat as suspect.

(c) Look for pin points which are made to insert circuitry to activate explosives.

(d) To look for stains on the wrappings (Eg. greasy marks) which indicates "sweating" explosives.

(e) To look for smell in parcels. If it contains explosives it may give an aroma of marzipan or almonds.

(vi) The host should be instructed not to take all gifts immediately to the residence. They should be subjected to a "cool off" period, at least 24 hours in an isolated place, prior to opening them.

Sgt. Brig. L. J. I. Fernando, VSV, Addl. Secretary for Secretary Defence.

Military situation

In another development, a high ranking Government official sought the views of retired service commanders, and other retired senior military officials for their views on the current military situation and the ongoing terrorist war.

A group of them met for three hours at the BMCH and an aide memoire was being prepared for the Government.

While all this went on, Army Commander Cecil Waidyaratne, last week repeated his warning to his senior staff that severe punishment would be meted out to those divulging information to the media. This time it came in the form of a signal sent out on his behalf by Brigadier H. S. Hapuarachchi, the Military Secretary.

Talking of information to the media, last week's disclosures in this column that Dr. Sunanda Madduma Bandara, recommended a censorship after the Pooneryn disaster has brought in a response from the information boss. I said last week that Dr. Madduma Bandara recommended to President Wijetunga that a censorship be

The Director of Information not only issued a press release on this subject but took the unusual step of rushing with the denial to other sections of the media as well. This is what the press release says:

"The Director of Government Information denies as completely false and baseless the news items appearing in 'The Sunday Times' of 21.11.1993 which said that he had recommended to the Government a censorship of news relating to the Pooneryn incident. The Director of Information states that he had at no time recommended to the Government any censorship on news relating to the Pooneryn incident or any other incident."

Dr. Bandara did recommend the declaration of a censorship. Two senior Army officers, both well experienced in the workings of the media, however, did not favour the idea.

But it is certainly a welcome thing to learn that Dr. Madduma Bandara is not in favour of censorship but, like he has declared in a newspaper interview last week, agrees that it is not workable.

For those involved in the war, having a penchant for astrology, and auspicious times for action, one man who may have some good advice would be Jayantha Perera, an astrologer who is also an electronics engineer. V. Jayanthi, the Colombo based Correspondent for the reputed Tamilnadu English newspaper "HINDU" interviewed Mr. Perera recently.

Among the points he made: "Sri Lanka's horoscope belongs to the Kumbha Rasi and it is affected by Saturn. Till March, 1993, the period was unfavourable. But subsequently, he has entered Aquarius and this is a very congenial time. In this position, Saturn will give what the people have been waiting for, what they deserve, in an impartial way. It will be an objective solution that will be fair to all people."

"The crucial time begins from September and we should know where we are going by November 10. I can see no scope for external intervention right now, but an impartial negotiation has to take place internally. This should begin now", Mr. Perera is quoted as saying.

He adds: "The process did not move forward because Saturn was still now in Capricorn - a sign of conflict". Because of mutual distrust, there could be no agreement or compromise.

The Government responsibility, as said earlier, does not end with the provision of finance for the conduct of the war. The Government must be the motivating force for us in the classical concept, war is the extension of politics by other means. The determination to win must prevail and the nation must support the cause. In other words there needs to be a mobilisation of national effort for the war.

Those who are conversant with the ongoing separatist war say there is an immediate need for the Government to take stock of the military reversals suffered and implement corrective measures. At the same time, a re-assessment of future strategy should be made, the organisational and equipment requirements of security forces meaningfully assessed for combat preparedness, they say.

All these measures require an intimate political direction of the war for which the appointment of a Minister to