

OP/ED

Censored

Incredible Censor

The man authorised by the Competent Authority (Government Censor) to approve "military related news" yesterday did the most incredible act of censoring -- he censored what the censor had earlier passed.

The government's own death toll figures of the Armed Services and the LTTE given by the Operational Headquarters of the Defence Ministry in Operation Riviresa were cut with a red ball point pen yesterday.

The same censor also cut a Sunday Times map depicting the successes of the Sri Lanka Army in Operation Riviresa and believe it or not the name of the Army Commander as well.

Cornered LTTE hits the city

The first phase of what is easily the largest military campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in recent times, "Operation Riviresa", was accomplished within 72 hours last week.

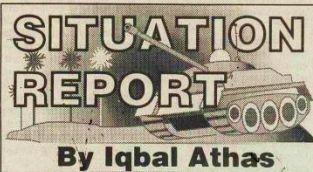
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But the troops fought their way to achieve their objective. With the first phase over, (Censored) Sri Lanka Army are now gearing themselves to accomplish tasks set out in "Operation Riviresa".

But there were clear indications that LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, was hell bent on extending the guerrilla war from the north to other theatres in a strong bid to stall the thrust into Jaffna. As widely expected, Tigers cashed in on the depleted security forces strength in the east to trigger off a string of incidents. If that was bad enough, they brought the war to Colombo by attacking the Kolonnawa Oil Storage Complex and the LPG Plant in Orugodawatte. The daring operation that led to the deaths of at least 21 security forces personnel was undoubtedly a scathing indictment on security precautions in the City. It also portended a completely new dimension to threats of guerrilla attacks on vulnerable points and VIPs in the city.

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But some of the assassins themselves were shot dead.

But on October 9, a group of suspected LTTE assassins mounted a daring attack on the EPPDF chummary at Havelock Road with the aim of killing its leader, Parliamentarian Douglas Devananda, a gutsy young man who has braved two previous death attempts. He escaped but three of his bodyguards and a driver were killed. Ironically, the assassants got away.

Just 11 days later, on October 20, a group of Tiger guerrillas (there were conflicting views on their numbers which ranged from 10 to 20) launched attacks on the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation's Oil Storage tanks at Kolonnawa and the Equipped Petroleum Gas installation in Orugodawatte. Twenty one security forces personnel and two civilians were killed. Initial estimates of the damage caused is being put at over Rs. 75 million. Over 50,000 metric tons of diesel (more than half the country's monthly requirement) and a large stock of kerosene has been destroyed.

From the early hours of last Friday till afternoon yesterday, the attackers were on a spree causing wanton destruction and engaging in sporadic gun battles with Police and security forces. While this went on, the fires caused by explosions continued. Plumes of dark clouds blackened the bright sky.

Concerned about the severe economic damage it would cause, Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, promptly telephoned Indian Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao to seek help. Premier Rao promptly responded by rushing an Indian fire fighting unit with equipment on an Indian Air Force aircraft.

As security forces and Police fought, to flush out the remaining Tiger guerrillas at Kolonnawa, there was increasing concern in some sections of the Government over the efficacy of security in the City and suburbs. They fear the LTTE may continue with its campaign of violence. Hence, they say that more precautionary measures would be inevitable.

Capturing Jaffna: the unconventional way

The Sri Lankan Army Chief (Censored) has invited both praise and criticism. When (Censored) was appointed Army Chief in January 1994 he made a statement

Unfortunately, until the Sri Lanka army was galvanized by the political leaders of the PA it halted to deliver the goods. Had national security been left to the Sri Lankan generals, today over 40,000 Sri Lanka troops would have been fighting less than 600 LTTE cadres in the East.

Although both these statements gave great hope to the Sri Lankan public who are constantly living in hope, it created a wrong impression in the minds of the people that the war against the LTTE can be brought to an end in two to three years. It also reflected the understanding of Sri Lankan military leaders of their comprehension of guerrilla warfare.

The bottom line is clear. By being reactive and not provocative, the Sri Lanka army allowed the LTTE to grow from an organisation of handful members in 1974 to a movement of over 15,000 cadres.

When a national army engages a formidable guerrilla force like the LTTE,

First, who will hold Jaffna? Do they have the manpower to control an area where the population will be friendlier to the LTTE.

Second, will the Sri Lankan forces have sufficient manpower, both to strike and control Jaffna, and then to conduct raids into the mainland to prevent the LTTE from destabilizing the peninsula?

Third, what is the strategic advantage of holding Jaffna? The answers to these questions are clear. The Sri Lankan

troops will be able to hold Jaffna with the assistance of rival Tamil groups such as EPPDF, PLOTE, TELO and possibly EPRLF and EROS. Unless these groups are under strict instructions to conduct themselves in a disciplined manner, and the troops themselves are well managed, the Tamil public are bound to support the LTTE.

It is history that the Jaffna peninsula has been under LTTE control from about late 1985/early 1986 up to now with the exception of two years during which the IPKF controlled the peninsula. Therefore, the Sri Lankan troops and these rival groups will be in an unfriendly terrain.

Velupillai Prabhakaran will ensure that if he does not control Jaffna, the Sri Lankan troops will neither control the East nor Jaffna. He will destabilize both these theatres.

History has much to offer. With over 100,000 operational troops and much more resources, the Indians could not destroy the LTTE from 1987 to 1989. Contrary to some statements by Sri Lankan politicians and donors, recent records reveal that India was determined to destroy the LTTE but it could not.

For India, Sri Lanka was like America's Vietnam and the Afghans of the Soviets.

Militarily, the government troops should constantly conduct operations with the aim of killing as many LTTE cadres as possible, demoralizing the existing cadres and preventing new recruits from joining the LTTE.

Politically, the government must not wait until the war is over to implement the political package. No insurgency has been won in history, without winning the hearts and the minds, the war against the LTTE can never be won. Who will live in the North even if the North is recovered from the grips of the LTTE. It will be the Tamils.

This is the main reason why military campaigns in heavily populated areas like Jaffna should not be conducted in a conventional fashion. The Tamil residents will remember the destruction of the houses and property and the injuries and death of civilians for a long time.

When the LTTE retreats into the jungles of Mullaitivu the Sri Lanka troops stretched out to a maximum, both in the peninsula and the East, will find it hard to win against the LTTE in a prolonged guerrilla warfare campaign.

What should be the current government military strategy?

Today the LTTE is harassing the Sri Lankan forces in the North and the East, striking the border villages and massacring civilians, and sending suicide bombers to Colombo, because the LTTE has been allowed to grow into a massive organisation. The LTTE has virtually created a de facto state.

The Sri Lankan strategy should be to weaken both the military, political and economic capability of the LTTE.

Towards this goal, the government should fight the LTTE not only in the military plane but also in the political and economic plane. How can this be achieved?

Economically, the government has the bureaucracy and the resources to develop the Tamil areas that had been recovered from the grip of the LTTE. Unless the government demonstrates to the Tamils its sincerity by giving them also equal economic opportunities, there will be no change of heart. Without winning the hearts and the minds, the war against the LTTE can never be won. Who will live in the North even if the North is recovered from the grips of the LTTE. It will be the Tamils.

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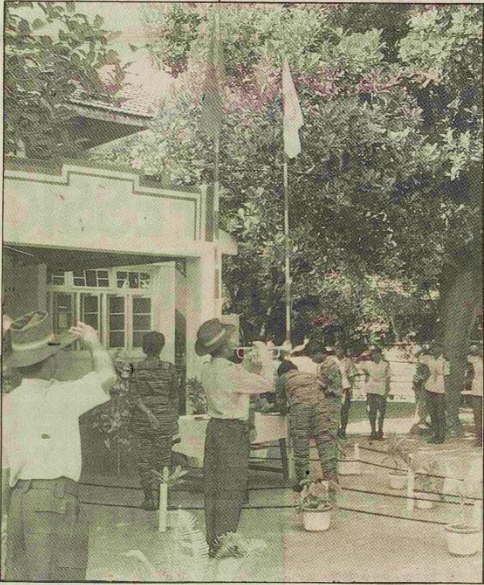
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The Sri Lankan military leaders must change their thinking - they are fighting an unconventional and not a conventional war.



Jaffna under LTTE: a rebel police station