Operation 'Yal Devi' in retrospect. (1993, November 07) The *Island*.

Operation 'Yal Devi' in retrospect

THE ISLAND 7.11.93

by Ravana

The successes and the failures of any military operation is best assessed by taking a hard look at the enemy — his casualties, his ability to recover from the losses and build upon the gains and the morale of his troops and his support base. Such assessments are often rare, particularly because the required information is kept within the organisation. But as time lapses and situations change, even highly classified information begins to seep and become public.

It has been a month since the controversial 'Operation Yal Devi' was launched. The damage sustained by the Sri Lanka Army has been written and is public. But the LTTE side of the story has never been exposed. Such has been the ironies of fighting highly dedicated and ruthless guerrilla force where they prefer to die than to divulge organisational secrets.

Prabhakaran

Velupillai Prabhakaran, the chairman and military commander of the LTTE, ordered the deployment of its best fighting regiments comprising about 1000 cadres and their leaders to counter "Operation Yal Devi" on September 29, 1993. The counter offensive was led by Balraj, the Deputy military commander of the LTTE. Balraj, was trained by the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's foreign intelligence Agency, in Uttara Pradesh from October 1983 to January 1994 and subsequently assigned to Jaffna as the first head of LTTE intelligence. In mid 1984, he was called back to India for specialized training in explosives and thereafter to manage the training camps together with Ponnaman, the brother of Yogaratnam Yogi. Balraj remained in India till late 1986, and returned to Jaffna with Prabhakaran. After having played a critical role during the IPKF episode, he was rewarded by Prabhakaran both as an outstanding fighter and a dedicated revolutionary and appointed the commander of the Charles Anthony Regiment.

Since early 1993, he was appointed the Deputy Military Commander, a position held previously under house arrest. Interestingly the LTTE has two regiments — the Visalahan Regiment named after Visalahan alias Joy, a bodyguard of Prabhakaran during the IPKF episode and subsequently killed by the Sri Lanka army during Eelam War II. Today, the Visalahan Regiment is based in the Beirut base complex in Batticaloa and is deployed in the East. The Charles Anthony Regiment, named after an LTTE fighter who died in 1983, is based in the peninsula and is deployed in the North. Balraj was personally instructed by Prabhakaran to lead Charles Anthony Regiment and attack the advancing Sri Lanka army on September 29. Balraj was injured on his leg in the counter offensive.

The LTTE also lost 9 of its top commanders. Sithambarapillai Sivarupan alias Senthuran, the Commander of the heavy weapons wing. Senthuran, who was the former Commander of Vadamarachchi Sector in Jaffna was promoted to the LTTE rank of Major. Sinharasa Arulnayagam alias Naresh, the Commander of the Special Forces of the LTTE for Kilinochchi. Naresh, who was a Group Leader of the Weli Oya (Manal Aru) area in 1991, was promoted to the LTTE rank of Major. His deputy, Dharmalingam Jayakumar alias Dushyanthan, the Deputy Commander of the Special Forces for Kilinochchi was also killed and was posthumously promoted Major. Three male camp commanders — Anthonipillai Pathmanathan alias Sendir (Kantharodai), Soma Murugesu alias Selvam (Periyapunchikulam), Maniam Sirisivanathan alias Kumaran (Karativu) were also killed and promoted to the LTTE ranks of Major.

Two Commanders

Two female camp commanders — Nadaraja Subashini alias Suhanya, the Commander of the girls camp at Irupalai and Thrilogasingham Selvarani alias Mano, the commander of the girls camp at Arali were also killed and posthumously promoted to the LTTE rank of major. The LTTE also lost Udayakumar alias Kichchan, believed to be an intelligence wing leader, who was promoted to the LTTE rank of Major.

The Sri Lanka army lost seven officers — they are Major Deepal Waduge, Captain Sudath Kaluwepitiya, Captain Nalin Jayatillake, Captain Rohana de Silva, Captain Chaminda Jayakody, Lt Damitha Jayasekera, and Lt Thusitha Mudalige.

The LTTE also lost 4 middle level commanders — Marianpillai Camillus alias Pulomin, who was in-charge of the road block at Salambakulam in Mannar, Kandasamy Mahindan alias Pradeepan, commander of the Paranthan Camp in 1992, Thangayel Radhamohan alias Mohan Ruban, in-charge of the LTTE boat movement at Pulopalai and Aruneshan Kingsley alias Shermilan, commander of the Nunavil Camp, all of who were promoted to the LTTE rank of Captain. The LTTE also lost 13 other leaders of the rank captain — 10 men and 3 women. The LTTE also lost 26 Lieutenants — 4 women and 22 men — and 21 Second Lieutenants — 9 women and 12 men. The LTTE acknowledged the loss of a total of 86 bodies which they recovered and displayed at Chavakachcheri for public veneration. The Sri Lanka army recovered 38 bodies of the LTTE fighters. Even though this amounts to a total of 124 men and women fighters, it can be said that the LTTE lost over 150 men and women as they normally refrain from disclosing the total number of fighters killed. Therefore, it can be assessed that a total of about 150-200 rank and file were killed and 300-350 were injured.

The Sri Lanka army lost a total of 7 officers and 108 men. One officer and two men were missing in action. The officer was army captain Manjula Nanayakkara of the tank regiment who refused to abandon his damaged tank while his men persuaded him to retreat under heavy enemy fire. A total of 17 officers and 235 men were injured — this included Colonel Sarath Fonseka, the Brigade Commander, whose men fought courageously sustaining the largest number of casualties virtually in hand to hand fighting. Colonel Fonseka, had the distinction of commanding the assault brigade of Balraj One and the Deputy Task Force Commander of Operation Akuru Pahara, both of which killed 1350 LTTE cadres and lost 250 soldiers.

During the fighting on September 29, 1993, the leading brigade commanded by Colonel Fonseka lost 90 men and the rear brigade commanded by Col. Kottegoda lost 16 men, whilst holding the flank. The casualties are an indication of the intensity of the battle.

Best Men

The LTTE had deployed its best men in the front — practice they had from the early 1980's. This deployment pattern where the leaders go in front has its advantages and disadvantages. For a organisation of the strength of 8000 men and women, losing 150 men which include some of its best men is a major blow. For the Sri Lankan armed forces, now over 115,000 men losing 125 men is not a major blow. In guerilla warfare the losses are always heavy — this includes casualties as well as weapons — the State strategy is to isolate the guerrilla by denying popular support using hearts and minds winning programs and by hitting hard at the enemy. In context every military commander who wants to see an end to terrorism must read Carlos Marighellas's "The Manual of the Urban Guerrilla," the most widely read and translated terrorist book in modern history.

While destroying nearly 900 boats from the air and ground, the Sri Lanka army destroyed nine LTTE camps — Keeden's camp, Balu's camp, Arsha women's training camp, Senghar camp, Jaya's transit camp, Sothiya's women camp, Karendran's technical workshop, Kilali jetty and pier, and the Elthumadduval Sea Tiger base and pier. Even though the aim of the operation was to destroy boat landing points and allied facilities used by the LTTE in Kilali area, the overall aim was to cause maximum destruction to the enemy fighting machinery and thereby weaken the LTTE. This has been achieved at a cost.

An LTTE deserter confided in this writer that, "The Kilali battle has, both sides. It has been a major disaster for the LTTE for having promised the people that they will not allow the Sri Lanka army to advance even a few yards. It is costly, but today the Sri Lanka army has proved that it can march anywhere they want to." "However," he said, "the overall military strategy of weakening the LTTE depends on the ability of the Sri Lanka army to strike hard in the peninsula with the same momentum of Operation Yal Devi."

He added. "If the Sri Lanka army launches another operation in a

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different direction towards Jaffna, the LTTE will not be able to sustain it. They will immediately call for talks"

Explaining the fall out from Kilali, the LTTE cadre said, "Otherwise, the LTTE will be able to rebuild what has been lost and strengthen what has been weakened. Time is of the essence."

Overall Strategy

Spelling out the overall LTTE strategy, the LTTE cadre added, "Now that the performance of the Sri Lanka army is known, the thinking of the LTTE is to move as many surplus cadres to the East to destabilize the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai in time for the election." "This can be thwarted by keeping heartland — Jaffna.

The name given for the operation caused panic in the north and delight in the south. 'Yal Devi,' being the Colombo — Jaffna express gave a message both to the north and to the south. It was not the losses of the Sri Lanka army but the fact that the troops did not at least march up to Chavakachcheri that angered the majority community. The newspapers in Colombo itself portrayed that it was not a limited operation but a massive thrust on the LTTE. The fact that the LTTE drew cadres from its six commands — Mannar, Mulaitivu (Vavuniya, Weli Oya, Kilinochchi) and Jaffna and limited cadres from Trincomalee, Batticaloa/Amparai demonstrate that they were preparing to prevent the fall of Jaffna, at all costs. There is a school of thought that had the Sri Lanka army managed to deploy 10,000-15,000 men and marched to Jaffna town, it would have lost 2000 men. This is supported by the argument that if one was to calculate the number of men killed by the LTTE since Eelam War II, it would have been worthwhile to strike Jaffna town and take control of the peninsula. In such an event, PLOTE, TELO and EPDP, the three Tamil militant groups supporting the government's anti-LTTE drive, have pledged to assist the troops in holding Jaffna.

school of thought — if the LTTE cadres in the peninsula is regularly engaged in battle, the LTTE will be weakened to such a degree that it will have to retreat to the jungles and revert back to unconventional guerrilla warfare.

Mode of Fighting

This is based on the fact that in conventional warfare, the mode of fighting the LTTE can now afford due to their high strength, the Sri Lanka army is superior to the LTTE. However, marching to Jaffna will be costly — there will be heavy casualties on both sides, as the LTTE is bound to pool all its resources against the army. The LTTE which is holding back the civilian population, without allowing them to leave for the south, will suffer heavy casualties as well. These are the two options which the Wijetunge-Wickramasinghe administration should seriously consider.

Costly exercise

It has been belatedly learnt that the success of fighting over the LTTE is neither to capture LTTE held territory not to destroy the public who support them. The success of fighting the LTTE is to kill as many cadres as possible within the shortest possible time with the least number of casualties and to erode their support base by a combination of psychological operations and community programs. Whether we like it or not, the war against the LTTE is a prolonged battle and a costly exercise. The success also depends on the ability to isolate the LTTE from the public.

The strategy envisaged by experts is the same formula the IPKF had worked out — isolating them in the Mulaitivu jungles and cutting off the supply lines — until the Premadasa Administration provided them with arms and ammunition to fight the IPKF. As mentioned by Rohan Gunaratna in his latest book, "Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka — The role of India's Intelligence Agencies," the war against the LTTE is best assessed by General Dipender Singh, the Overall Force Commander of the Indian Armed Forces in Sri Lanka and General General Officer Commanding the Indian Armed Forces in Jaffna. They state that at its best it would take 10 to 20 years to annihilate the LTTE, which continues to enjoy support from a considerably large section of the Tamils in the peninsula and with supplies from Tamil Nadu.

Since the days of the IPKF, the dynamics of the conflict has changed. With the death of Rajiv Gandhi, the threat to Jayalalitha and more recently to Karunanidhi by the LTTE, the support for the LTTE is withering away except among 22 Tamil Nadu separatist parties enjoying the support of 3 million Tamils. However, the Indian police through 36 coastal check points and the Indian Navy working in close liaison with Indian intelligence has prevented at least 80 percent of the supplies to the LTTE coming in from India or from abroad. The only supply the LTTE continued to enjoy is the capture supply from the Sri Lankan forces. Since Eelam War II began the LTTE continues to recover more weapons from the Sri Lankan forces than the number of weapons the Sri Lankan forces continues to recover from the LTTE. These have been the ironies of fighting a seasoned guerrilla force like the LTTE and soldiers in their camps and on the ground not following basic field craft. Since the Janakapura disaster, soldiers and their commanders have been specifically instructed to follow the basic military rules and prevent from being checkmated by the enemy.

Support

Another important dynamic of the conflict has been the fact that the LTTE has lost considerable popular support among the Sri Lankan Tamils since the death of Rajiv Gandhi and R. Premadasa. Today the average Tamil from the north feels that this is a never ending war. A few years before he felt that LTTE will be able to deliver the goods. D. B. Wijetunge's controversial statement that "that is terrorist problem and not an ethnic problem" has weakened the Colombo based Tamil militant and Tamil political parties which are com-

statement which Ranil Wickramasinghe has tried to soften has affected the LTTE. The LTTE, which derives its energy from Tamil nationalism on the pretext that "We are fighting for your rights," is in a state of crisis. In short, repetition of Wijetunge's statement continues to erode the legitimacy of the LTTE as an organisation fighting for the rights of a people, because those very people are enjoying a better standard of living in areas out of LTTE control. This political trap itself will make the LTTE try their best to elimjnate the current UNP leadership.

The LTTE has always had the edge over the Sri Lanka's defence machinery in orchestrating their military and political effort to produce the best results. Soon after the 'Yal Devi' operation Prabhakaran made a statement in which he said the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army "Cecil Waidyratne, who suppressed the insurrection organized by the JVP in the recent past, is now engaged in conducting military operations in the Jaffna peninsula with his deadly and ruthless army. Therefore, we can fathom how the Sinhalese troops under his command, would eliminate and torture Tamil youth." Stating that another military operation is afoot and more than 20,000 troops are in readiness to move, the statement adds, "The Sinhalese Security forces plan to suppress our liberation struggle, by annihilating the Tamils. Due to this plan, they have invaded the southern Tamil Eelam and caused maximum destruction to the lives and property of the Tamils. The same is going to be carried out in the Northern Eelam, especially in the Jaffna peninsula." Stating that it is better to fight the invading Sinhalese forces and liberate their land than to dies as slaves, Prabhakran states, "to achieve this supreme objective, we appeal to all the youth, both male and female, to join our armed struggle. This is an urgent appeal. We request the sons of this land to the appeal of our motherland, Tamil Eelam people! You will save your lives, only by fighting. We will all fight together and save our families and our land."

To Prabhakaran's appeal there was only a weak response in Jaffna. However, the Psy Ops specialists in the Ministry of Defence taskedto manipulate and weaken enemy thinking, failed to pre-empt even that weak response and consolidate the Kilali effort by airdropping leaflets stating that "the army cordially welcome any LTTE cadre who surrenders." Such has been the capacity of a poorly funded and weakly staffed psychological warfare section in the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence. If the Government of Sri Lanka is to reap the best of operations like 'Yal Devi' it should develop greater insight into enemy psychology, a more sophisticated role with the media and initiate participation of government departments in developing the boarder areas and irresistible welfare schemes for youth who give up violence.

Failures

One of the biggest failures of the Government in the war effort has been to stop the weekly debriefing and issue press releases thererby not guiding the media to reporting their side of the story. Many of the recent misunderstandings between the army and the media has been a result of that. While the media must learn to appreciate and honour those dying to save the country, where they live and work, the policy and decision makers of the defence bureaucracy must realize the importance of good media relations. Recent accounts of the north confirms that the LTTE has realized the significance of a good press and is making the best use of it. During the Falklands war the British continue to brief the press daily and during Desert Storm the Americans met the press once or twice a day. It is unfortunate that the Ministry of Defence has not realized the value of working together with the media in fighting a war. If such a relationship exists, the media will help a national effort of bringing Sri Lanka back to prosperity.

(Next week The Black Tigers phenomena — its origin and their targets)