

Details emerge from the northern battlefront. (1993, November 14)
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Details emerge from the northern battlefront

By The Sunday Times Defence Correspondent

It seemed a strange quirk of irony that one debacle had to follow another in just one month.

At pre dawn last Thursday (November 11), some 600 Tiger terrorists, both men and women, over-ran the naval base at Nagathevanthurai and the adjoining Army camp at Pooneryn.

When their two day siege ended, more than 400 soldiers were killed and an estimated Rs. 250 million worth of military hardware and other material was lost.

Both these military installations are located on the western flank of Elephant Pass, overlooking the waters of the Jaffna lagoon - the scene of many military encounters in the past six weeks.

They formed the bulwark of forward defence on the mainland and faced the Tiger held Jaffna peninsula. The hinterland of the lagoon and its deep water passages became the focal point of operations for both the military and the guerrillas for this constituted the only free linkage between the peninsula and the mainland. The significance of this was heightened after the launch of the seven-day long "Operation Yal Devi" on September 28.

When this operation, intended to "destroy boat landing points and allied facilities used by the LTTE in area Kilali," ended on October 4, troops withdrew. No sooner did this happen, security forces started a fresh offensive beginning November 1 as I reported in these columns on November 7.

On November 1 Sri Lanka Air Force helicopters engaged Tiger boats crossing the lagoon. This was while guns from naval craft and artillery batteries opened fire from sea and land. Of a convoy of some 25 boats, five were reported hit. From that day the exercise has been going on to curb boat movements. Despite the pressure, the LTTE operated boat services continued.

Some who arrived in Colombo on Wednesday (November 10) night said that a large number of civilians had crossed the lagoon the previous night. Were they civilians or was that the movement of cadres?

"It's just terrible"

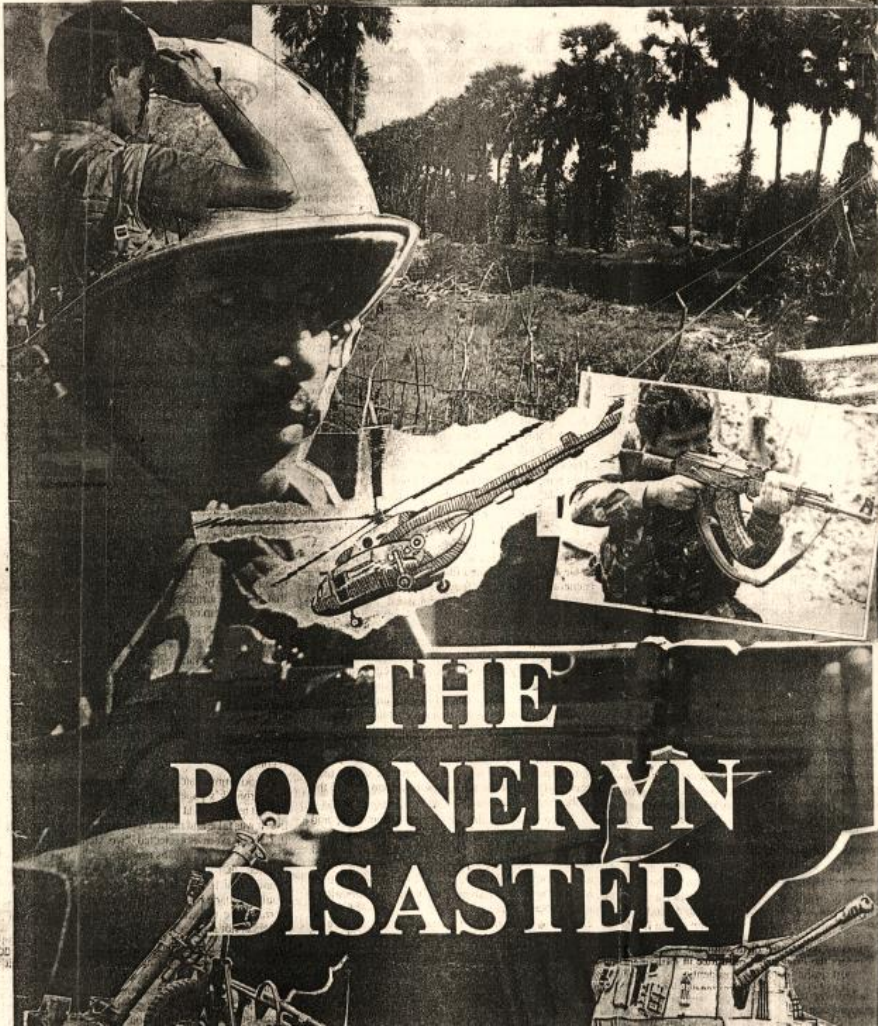
From hindsight it would appear that this was the mustering of LTTE forces to attack the Pooneryn sector.

As the following account reveals, even by last night, the fuller details of what happened at Nagathevanthurai and Pooneryn were not clear to top officials in the defence establishment. "It's just terrible," said one high ranking officer briefing a senior politician.

On Thursday, even the Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence put out just a one paragraph statement. It said:

"1. KILINOCHCHI DISTRICT ON 11 NOV 93 - POONERYN AREA - A massive attack was launched by the LTTE during the early hours on 11 November 1993 at the Pooneryn Army and Navy defences. It is reported fierce fighting is still continuing. It is believed that the casualties on both the SF and LTTE are very high. Further communique will be issued as and when details are available."

By Friday, the military and defence media spokesman, Brigadier Nalin Angammana, told media personnel that his office would not deal with them directly. Information would henceforth be channelled through the Government Information Department.



The LTTE men had withdrawn. A sizeable number had returned to the Jaffna peninsula via the Kilali passage whilst others into their hideouts in the Wannai area. All the weaponry seized from their hideouts had been removed, the bulk of them to Jaffna.

As the re-inforcements began to consolidate their positions, representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) informed military authorities in the north that the Tigers were handing over the bodies of 300 dead soldiers. ICRC officials were in turn arranging to hand them over to the Army. Besides this toll of 300, high ranking military officials said last night that there were at least another 100 bodies of soldiers bringing the total dead to over 400. The official said the number wounded would also be between 250 and 400. He said a fuller count of the casualties would be available late today but added there were some difficulties due to several mutilated bodies.

LTTE casualties

In terms of casualties, the LTTE had also suffered a heavy toll. By last night, through intercepts from radio transmission, 396 were confirmed dead. This included at least three Sea Tiger leaders. There was also indications during the past three days that LTTE leader, Velupilla Prabhakaran, was personally keeping in touch with his men in the field and giving them instructions.

The largest number of LTTE losses had come when they made a vain bid on Friday night to over-run the area where Col. Ranjan Silva and his men were holding out. "They got a really bloody nose", said one senior military officer who was monitoring the operation.

Col. Shantha Kottegoda who led the re-inforcement has taken control of the Pooneryn Sector. Security officials said steps were under way to re-establish both the Naval base and the Army Camp.

Among those who were caught up in the attack at Pooneryn were a large group of soldiers who were in training. Instead of being sent to camp which were specifically designed for training purposes, the new recruits had been sent to Pooneryn to prevent any possible desertions. Escape from there would have been only to enemy hands. The move was questioned by some senior officials on the grounds that a high intensity battle area was psychologically not suitable to train men. He pointed out that was why even the British, during war days, chose salubrious climes like Dujatalawa in Sri Lanka and Dehra Dun in India for training camps.

The two battalions deployed in the Pooneryn sector were the 3 Gajaba Regiment and the 1 Sri Lanka Light Infantry. This was in addition to a group from the Artillery Regiment.

Besides Col. Silva's group, military officials said, there were also two other small groups that held out. However, details of what they faced were not available.

As more details of what happened in the Pooneryn sector began to emerge, many questions were also surfacing. One was whether the disaster in the area occurred due to any weakness in previous strategies that left the troops open to Thursday's sucker punch.

But one thing is now well known. That is the fact that the attack came from all directions - the land thrust from the south and the east of the two installations. What is much more significant is the sea borne thrust from the north. The latter very clearly confirms the active existence of the Sea Tigers Base at Kilali.

As pointed out in these columns repeatedly, claims that "Operation Yal Devi" was a total success is not really so. Whilst giving total credit and unequivocal admission for the courage of security forces in battling their way through "Operation Yal Devi", this column has questioned the wisdom of the strategy of withdrawal from Kilali.

Even before the disasters at Nagathavanthurai and Pooneryn, the subject of media relations has been engaging the attention of those running the defence establishment, more particularly after "Operation Yal Devi".

Some were of the view that the separatist war was being "fought and won" through hired hacks and ghost writers in the columns of newspapers. That too by screening video footage to those who are sick or have never seen the war areas from any side of the battle line.

The Sunday Times has been able to piece together details of how the worst disaster to hit the security forces occurred. The attacks on the two installations came from all directions on the landside and on the waterfront, significantly, from the now well-known Kilali passage.

Sea Tiger frogmen had arrived by bamboo rafts across this passage, stealthily moved across and destroyed the radar and communications towers at Nagathavanthurai. Boatloads of other Tigers followed through the lagoon and from their jungle hideouts in the Wannai. It seemed as if each group knew what target to go for. With communications cut off, some of them fired Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) into bunkers in the Forward Defence Lines (FDLs). Soon they were on fire and the men inside ran helter skelter for cover. From there they began firing at the attackers and a confrontation ensued.

A group of over 75 brave Navy men resisted the Tiger onslaught. Realising that they were meeting resistance, Tigers radioed for re-inforcements. They arrived via Kilali in boatloads. Details about these were told to senior military officials at Elephant Pass by Navy men who were among those who swam and tramped their way together with some soldiers.



No sooner the news of the attack reached Colombo, security top brass were examining options. Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Cecil Waidyaratne, flew to the north. Together with his top brass, he was making plans for damage control.

Soon after over-running Nagathavanthurai Naval Base, Tiger terrorists had seized the armoury. They ransacked millions of rupees worth of equipment. They also seized the fleet of boats that were used to patrol the waters of the Jaffna lagoon. This included at least six large boats fitted with machine guns and other equipment.

The attack on the neighbouring Pooneryn Army Camp was also carried out simultaneously. When RPG fire began to hit FDL positions setting them alight, troops were ordered to go for cover.

'Total black out'

As fighting broke out, troops at Pooneryn found they were unable to make radio contact with Nagathavanthurai Naval Base. They were blacked out. The main northern military base at Palaly, the one at Elephant Pass and at Vavuniya were, however, contacting Pooneryn.

When fighting became fierce, troops took up position and fought back. In the ensuing melee and confusion, some scattered away whilst others were hit

and fell dead. By then the Tigers had over-run a better part of the Pooneryn Camp, ransacked the entire armoury there and gained control.

As dawn broke Tigers appeared to have over-run both Nagathavanthurai and Pooneryn. Troops who scattered had taken up positions in outer areas, some regrouping in an area of around 1,000 square yard outer area of the Pooneryn camp. Their presence was spotted by SLAF aircraft and the senior officer there, Col. T.T.R. (Ranjan) Silva also made contact with top officers at Elephant Pass, where military options were under scrutiny.

During this time the Tigers who had ransacked the armoury had also commandeered a number of other items. They included two Czechoslovak made (T55) Main Battle Tanks (MBTs), Ten five zero (fifty calibre) guns, Two South African built Buffets, Six 120 mm Artillery Guns, two Land Rovers and three tractors. They also seized "secure" communication sets.

Security forces later on Thursday made preparations to induct re-inforcements both by sea and by air but came in for very heavy resistance. Tigers were using the Army's own 120 mm guns to fire at security forces positions. SLAF aircraft, forced to fly low due to cloud cover, were also coming in for fire. One of them was hit wounding the pilot on his leg. While this went on,

Tigers moved the Main Battle Tanks to a hideout somewhere near Kilinochchi. Although earlier reports said an SLAF aircraft destroyed one of them, it was later reported that it was a MBT recovery vehicle that has been hit. However, this could not be confirmed last night.

Holding the area the Tigers frustrated efforts by military forces to induct troops by sea or air throughout Thursday and Friday. Several attempts had to be aborted. The wounded soldiers lay without any medical attention, food or water. The batteries in the hand held communication sets Col. Silva and his men had were also running low.

The three service commanders - Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne (Army), Vice Admiral Mohan Samarasekera (Navy) and Air Vice Marshal Terrance Gunawardena (Air Force) — who reviewed the situation flew down on Friday to Anuradhapura for a top level meeting with General Hamilton Wanasinghe, Defence Secretary. Accompanying Gen. Wanasinghe from Colombo by air for the hurried conference was DIG Lionel Karunasena, head of the Police Department's elite Commando Unit, the Special Task Force (STF).

Besides deliberating the three service commanders also spoke with President D.B. Wijetunga on the telephone and gave their own assessments of the situation. Later Friday night the Sri Lanka Air Force pilots accomplished a task assigned to them with perfection. They dropped supplies including food, medicine, batteries to Col. Silva's besieged group of over 550 men. There was also a message of the shape of things to come. This helped provide medical attention promptly to a number of wounded soldiers.

Whilst this was going on Tigers who had planned to attack Col. Silva's position carried out a diversion.

A group of Tiger terrorists had arrived in bamboo rafts on the shores of Kankesanthurai, near the former Town Council (behind old Police Station), not far off from the Navy pier. They had all worn uniforms resembling Sri Lanka Army soldiers. When an Army patrol had challenged, the group had scattered. Some were detected near Vasavilan and other Mavidiyapuram. A third lot had been surrounded outside the FDLs. Security forces opened fire killing 15 of them. It appears that the task of the group was to infiltrate the Palaly Military Base and destroy the fuel dump and damage other installations. The idea appeared to be to tie down troops in Palaly (or attract more) and thus thwart efforts to induct re-inforcements in the Pooneryn sector. But by last afternoon troops at Palaly had secured the area.

Yesterday security top brass were determined to make a breakthrough. A team of commandos supported by infantry from 6 Gemunu Watch and 6 Sri Lanka Light Infantry made a beach landing at Kalmunai, the thin stretch of land (south of Jaffna peninsula) jutting into the sea separating the waters of the Gulf of Mannar and the Jaffna Lagoon. This was the area where LTTE offered resistance on Thursday and Friday. But the troops landed. In the face of occasional fire, they moved clearing their way through to link up with Col. Ranjan Silva's men and thus wresting control of the Pooneryn sector.

They landed at around 11.30 am yesterday and their mission was completed by evening.

As the re-inforcements moved, they evacuated wounded soldiers to a helicopter landing area they had cleared. They were also taking over

has questioned the wisdom of the strategy of withdrawing from Kilali.

This single act left open the Kilali facility to be used by the LTTE. Though I do not make these claims as an expert military strategist, to common sense lay reasoning, to leave open Kilali was tactically and a strategically ill advised move.

LTTE's thrust to Nagathavanthurai and Pooneryn came from Kilali, particularly the re-inforcements not to mention the sea borne cadres. Had Kilali been occupied then the military positions would have enabled the forces to control movement on the Jaffna lagoon and thus isolate the heartland of Eelam, the Jaffna peninsula from their guerrilla jungle base in the Wannai.

This appears to leave open to the LTTE the option of the northern maritime thrust on the Nagathavanthurai — Pooneryn sector.

This is not all. What appears to be more ironical is the fact that specific intelligence warning that the Tigers would attack the Pooneryn sector was made available to Army top brass. In fact Tigers had been doing practice runs on a beach areas.



Beach landing: armed forces landing on a northern beach during Operation Balavegaya