

THE ISLAND
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A soldier's lament

The separatist war has been going on and on for the last 11 years. Hundreds of military cadres and civilians have lost their valuable lives and most of them consisting of the younger generation of our country. It was the last Government that witnessed the separatist movement grow up from a mere terrorist group to a separatist movement waging a conventional war against our security forces as seen today. This terrorist group that came into focus with killings such as of the Inspector of Police Bastianpillai years ago, is now dictating the direction of the national politics.

If analysis of the growth of the separatist movement could be done, one could see three broad periods. Firstly, the period of the Eelam War I, the period from 83 — 87. Secondly, the period of the IPKF operations, (I would not use the word occupation) and lastly, the Eelam War 2, in other words the present period.

The first period witnessed the buildup of the terrorist movement and the successful buildup of the Sri Lankan Forces from a some what ceremonial force to an effective force. With the successful buildup of the forces, we were able to see that the Government exercised total control of the East towards the latter part of this period. The forces made road movements between numerous camps that we maintained in the North. In the final year of the first period only the peninsula had to

be with a major military operation. The much talked about "Operation Liberation" was launched. The plan of this operation underwent changes at the last moment due to political reasons and the area of operations was changed from Jaffna Municipal Limits to Vadamarachchi.

The IPKF settled down to long drawn out battle for good reasoning but unfortunately was not allowed to complete the task which they were well capable of achieving given a little more time. The IPKF decided to avoid direct confrontations as the LTTE proved too superior in direct confrontations. The IPKF realised that they lacked the fire power and the capacity at the platoon level for effectively matching the LTTE. Therefore the IPKF strategy became to confine the LTTE to the jungles and weaken them using the IPKF manpower superiority they enjoyed. If the IPKF was allowed to confine the LTTE to the jungles for another two monsoons we would not be facing this situation we are in today. It may be interesting to note that the IPKF did some studies to analyze the reasons for the effectiveness of the Sri Lankan Forces at that time. The departure of the IPKF resulting from the famous Hilton talks are well known to all of us. With the departure of the IPKF the present period commenced and we do not know for how long this period would extend or will there be a change.

The period we are in now, witnessed the growth of the LTTE to the level of being able to wage conventional warfare with our forces. They have been able to secure sophisticated weapons during this period with most of the weapons taken from overrunning camps. During the first years of the Eelam War 2 the LTTE could not have its own way in spite of the reorganisation and regrouping advantage they had during the Hilton talks.

This was mainly due to the dynamic and determined leadership of the senior officers who commanded the battle formations in the field. The unfortunate and the untimely deaths of the three Generals namely, General Kobbekaduwa, General Wimalaratne and General Lucky Wijeratne was the greatest blow to our forces and to the nation. The vacuum that was created could not be filled in any way. Some of the attempts made by the then military leadership to play down the losses of these great Generals proved to be failures. In these attempts, the past operations that were conducted by these Generals leading from the field with the troops came under heavy criticism. It is heartening to note that at present the forces are going through a deliberate effort to build up the effectiveness of the forces. This is most important as the forces will be called upon to undertake operations at a higher scale in the event the

peace talks fail. At that time we hope the entire nation would rally round the forces in their attempts.

The political campaigns in the runup for the Parliamentary and the Presidential elections have used the separatist war to the fullest advantage. Firstly, because it is a national problem and secondly as it provided ample opportunities to twist and turn to any angle for any advantage. The issues have even brought in the dead Generals as well. Some have even misquoted the Generals to prove certain points. That type of a approach is most disappointing as the Generals cannot be expected to respond from heaven.

We well remember an intellectual quoting the ideas of General Kobbekaduwa as saying the General was for a military solution to the separatist problem. The intellectual who went on TV on many occasions stated that he visited the General in Vavuniya and gave this interpretation as first hand knowledge. As a person who had moved with the General in operational duties for many years in the North and East, with an understanding of his thinking, I could mention that the General would never have mentioned such a thing. Probably the intellectual misunderstood with his ignorance of the military concepts and strategy, or it was deliberately misquoted. There cannot be a military option for a separatist war, especially when it has come to a level of conventional stage.

The military only plays the part in the overall plan which is called 'The National Plan' in the military terminology. There are many other fronts that the problem needs to be addressed, such as political, economic, social and the military plays only a part of it.

The magnitude of the military involvement may vary from time to time depending on many factors which may be too much to focus on in this letter. The military aims to weaken the separatist organisation in order to demonstrate the impossibility on their part to pursue a militant path and force them to negotiate. Thus the Government would be able to negotiate from a position of strength with the separatists in finding lasting solution to the problem. A lasting solution cannot be found by a military option alone. A person of the calibre and knowledge in the art of war as General Kobbekaduwa would never have mentioned the military option as the solution as quoted.

At certain political meetings it has also been stated that General Kobbekaduwa had stated that over 20,000 would die if Jaffna was to be taken and it was on his insistence that operations to gain control of Jaffna was not launched. It may be interesting to bring to the notice of some that there were two occasions when plans were made to launch operations in the Jaffna Municipal limits. All arrangements were made but it was on political decisions that the operations were not launched. The first

occasion was during '86 Operation Liberation and the second occasion was in '91 after the Jaffna Fort Operation. On both occasions it was General Kobbekaduwa who was the field commander. During Operation Liberation the operational area was shifted from Jaffna Municipality limits to Vadamarachchi causing logistical nightmares. It is the duty of the military commanders to brief the political masters (the term General always used) the implications of certain military operations and on both occasions I am sure the General would have given professional advice from the military point of view. It is only those involved in operations that will be aware of the precautions taken by commanders to minimise civilian casualties.

These measures on both occasions go against the operational interests causing military casualties and losing the possible tactical surprise the forces could achieve to their advantage.

One must not confuse civilian casualties and war crimes. It is most unfair to misquote and implicate national heroes in these political forums. The nation is well aware of the most valuable contributions made by these heroes. The least one could do is to leave them alone and let their spirit remain in peace. After all they loved peace and died for peace. It is those who wage war, who love peace most.

An Officer