

Pooneryn re-captured

● Over 400 soldiers dead; another 400 wounded

By The Sunday Times Defence Correspondent

As the security forces recaptured the besieged Pooneryn sector from Tiger control yesterday afternoon, 400 soldiers were dead and an equal number injured.

This is the highest ever casualty the security forces have suffered in the history of the separatist war. It came just a month after 115 soldiers including seven officers were killed in just one day during operation "Val Devi".

The attack came from all directions including the Kilali passage which the LTTE used effectively to bring in re-inforcements and inflict heavy casualties on the security forces.

Last Thursday, Tiger separatists launched a fierce attack on the Nagathevanthurai Navy Base and the Army Camp at Pooneryn, over-running both installations. The attack came from all directions including the Kilali passage which the LTTE used effectively to bring in re-inforcements and inflict heavy casualties on the security forces.

Commandos of the Special Forces Brigade, infantry from 6 Gemunu Watch and 6 Sri Lanka Infantry made a beach landing at Kalmunai, a tongue shaped thin strip of land south of the Jaffna peninsula jutting out from mainland Sri Lanka to fight their way through to the damaged Naval and Military establishments. The men were led by Colonel Shantha Kottegoda.

Barrier mild resistance, troops pushed their way through bravely to link up with a group of more than 500 soldiers headed by Lt. Col. Ranjan Silva who had been holding a section of the Pooneryn Army Camp, some one thousand square yards.

Lt. Col. Silva and his men, who had regrouped after Thursday's pre-dawn attack, had fought a gallant battle on Friday night to defy the LTTE attempts to overrun them. Some of his men were badly wounded and the batteries of their communication sets had run down. But Sri Lanka Air Force helicopters made a pin point drop of supplies on Friday night.

As the re-inforcements cleared their way through, they also evacuated some wounded soldiers. Bodies of both soldiers and terrorists who were killed lay along their path.

The exact death toll and the number injured were yet to be determined. The LTTE is reported to have handed over the bodies of over 200 soldiers to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Military officials were awaiting confirmation from ICRC to receive the bodies at Elephant Pass. Other bodies lying in battle areas were being recovered by re-inforcements.

The LTTE is reported to have suffered over 400 casualties, the bulk of them, in their effort to over-run Lt. Col. Silva's group who held a section of the camp. Security forces have confirmed the identities of 303 of the cadres through LTTE radio intercepts.

Besides Col. Silva's group, there were also at least two other groups of soldiers who were holed up in other areas which came within the siege. They have also been rescued.

Security sources said yesterday that the LTTE had moved the entire array of weaponry they seized from

Nagathevanthurai and Pooneryn across the Kilali passage to the Jaffna peninsula. This is said to include a large cache of arms and ammunition.

The same sources said that the two captured Czechoslovak built Main Battle Tanks were however taken to an unknown location near Kilinochchi where there are LTTE hideouts.

Meanwhile, troops at Palali Military Base thwarted attempts by Tiger terrorists to infiltrate the outer defences. The Operations Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence said 15 Tiger cadres were shot dead.

A Defence Ministry Communique last night said that, Radio intercepts and military intelligence reports have revealed that the LTTE had suffered heavily with 294 killed and a large number injured up to the Friday evening.

A further attack was mounted by the terrorists on Friday night on the Pooneryn defence establishment. Troops had by this time regrouped. They had repulsed the attack while inflicting heavy casualties. Some 200 terrorist bodies have been sighted outside the Camps yesterday morning.

The Air Force continued to airdrop food, medicine and other urgent supplies throughout the 11th and 12th November 1993. The Air Force also continued to strafe several known LTTE targets. It is regretted that by an unfortunate error, a Church and an Office building have suffered some damage.

The Military Establishments located in the Northern Province are being further strengthened.

Meanwhile Reuters news agency in a report last night said: The Sri Lankan military said hundreds of reinforcements had broken a siege of a key base in the northern Jaffna peninsula.

But the rebels, in a statement from their headquarters in London, said their forces were in control of the army and naval complex at Pooneryn and that more fighters had been despatched to the area to consolidate their hold.

Defence Secretary Hamilton Wanasinghe said 900 reinforcements, including elite commandos, had been sent to the camp in what he called a "daredevil rescue operation" ordered by President Wijetunga.

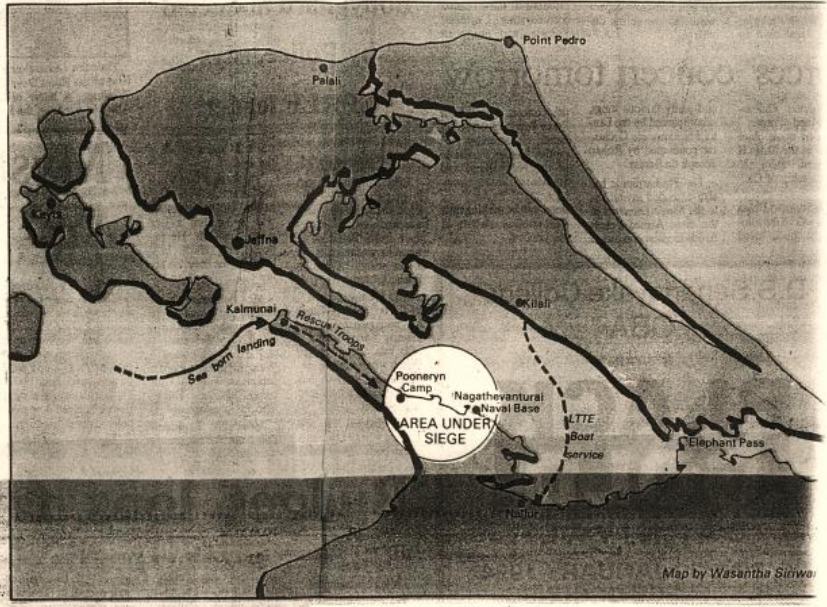
"We have now gained the upper hand. The (rebel) Tigers are fleeing," Wanasinghe told a news conference.

He said there was little resistance from rebels and that fighting had subsided around the camp.

General Wanasinghe put the rebel death toll at 500 although their radio gives the number as 150.

An LTTE statement issued in London said 400 government troops and 100 rebel fighters had been killed and that fighting was still going on in mopping up operations.

"More and more LTTE fighters have been despatched to the area to consolidate the captured complex and



to prevent army reinforcements being landed to evacuate besieged soldiers," the statement said.

It said its forces captured five boats, two tanks, several heavy weapons, 50 light machine guns and 400 rifles.

Gen. Wanasinghe said army reinforcements had crossed the Jaffna lagoon in small boats for 15 km (nine miles) amid sporadic firing and landed in the central area of the camp, defended by air and naval cover.

"Some of the besieged soldiers saw the troops and swam over to guide them," he said.

He said the Tigers had told the International Committee of the Red Cross that they would hand over 300 bodies of soldiers and sailors today.

"We don't know if all these are ours," said Gen. Wanasinghe adding that rescue troops had recovered 42 bodies of soldiers. Another 350 soldiers were wounded and would be evacuated as soon as possible.

Gen. Wanasinghe said the camp had been warned to expect attacks and had enough equipment for detection and defence.

"I can't think what happened. The Tigers achieved an element of surprise," he said.

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