

Military in quandary over LTTE ceasefire and arms ship. (1994, November 20). *The Sunday times*.

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By our Military Analyst

The biggest question in the country last week was, "is there or isn't there a ceasefire?"

Even after more than a decade of war, the military's woeful lack of direction in its efforts to end the war was starkly portrayed last week, when the LTTE's one-sided ceasefire, caught the military top brass totally unawares.

The first indication of the ceasefire came on the night of Saturday, November 12, when a navy listening post picked up a radio message in Tamil from Jaffna to all LTTE cadres.

It said Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran had ordered that there be no attacks for the next seven days.

No reason was given for the ceasefire.

Amazingly, while the intelligence information quickly reached the armed forces units in the north and east, the top brass and the politicians in Col-

ombo seemed blissfully unaware that Eelam War II had taken a new and dramatic turn.

The news reached several international journalists in Colombo on Sunday morning, but their repeated calls to the Defence Ministry shed no light on the situation.

With no deputy defence minister still being sworn in, the ministry official and the top brass seemed to have been overcome by a strange lack of direction, and even a basic knowledge of what was going on.

Even President Chandrika Kumaratunga, with every ministry in her hands since the Cabinet had not yet been sworn in, was unaware of the ceasefire until after international news organisations had flashed the story worldwide.

It was only around noon that the top brass realised that the ceasefire had not been officially declared by the LTTE, but that Prabhakaran, unable to get the government to agree to his repeated calls for a ceasefire, had

taken the bull by the horns and told his men to stop fighting.

Unsure of whether it was a trick by the Tigers, and what to do if it was genuine, the government and the military did the best thing they could think of: nothing.

With no major operations planned for the next several months, the army continued with its small-~~o~~ordon and search operations throughout the week, ambushing and killing two Tigers in the Batticaloa district on Tuesday and two in Welioya on Wednesday with no casualties of its own.

It seems ridiculous that the military was taken unaware by the ceasefire. After all, Prabhakaran had to react in some way to President Kumaratunga's landslide election victory.

Uppermost in his mind would have been the astounding number of Tamil (and Muslim) voters who cast their ballots for her in the north and east.

In Jaffna, of the 17,716 who managed to vote, 16,934, or

With the LTTE's unilateral ceasefire ending last night, and its 'Heroes Week' beginning today, the armed forces are on high alert, bracing for a long expected onslaught.

95.58 per cent, voted for Ms. Kumaratunga.

In Vanni, she got 83.8 per cent. In Batticaloa, 85.77 per cent. In Digamadulla, 71 per cent.

With the minorities voting almost en masse for Ms. Kumaratunga, the LTTE clearly feels the popular pressure for a peaceful end to the war. It chose to publicly appear to welcome the new President, and send out a peace feeler.

So Prabhakaran, always the cunning strategist, staged a public relations coup by stopping the fighting.

The result was to send the new government into a state of total confusion.

At the weekly Cabinet press

briefing, Information Minister Dharmasiri Senanayake seemed totally in the blues.

"There has been no official intimation of the so-called ceasefire," he said. "We are trying to find out whether it is true. We must clear the air before sending our negotiators back to Jaffna."

This was after three and half days of the seven day ceasefire had gone by.

On Thursday morning, the LTTE radio, 'Voice of the Tigers', announced that it was dismayed that President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government had not responded to its peaceful gesture. It further accused the navy of killing several fishermen off Mannar and Jaffna.

Clearly, Prabhakaran is cleverly doing his best to show the Jaffna people that he gave peace a chance, but that the government wasn't genuine in its desire for the war to end. By doing nothing, the government only reinforced the Tiger claim.

Meanwhile, 'Heroes Week' - which LTTE marks to honour its dead, begins today, ending on Saturday with 'Martyrs Day'. Prabhakaran's birthday coincides with Martyrs Day. This week is usually marked by a big attack on the forces.

Defence Secretary Hamilton Wanasinghe met district security co-ordinators last week, shortly before having a long discussion with President Kumaratunga on the position of the ceasefire, and possible attacks this week.

The fact that the government has not yet set a date for the resumption of peace talks is also in the LTTE's favour, in the public eye. Despite all assurances, the army still fears that the government may agree to a ceasefire, and many senior offic-

ers are unhappy that a military officer is not included in the negotiating team.

They believe this is a big disadvantage, since the leader of the LTTE delegation, Karikalan, is one of its most senior military strategists, placing the Tigers at a big advantage when discussions on military matters begin.

Meanwhile, rumours of major changes of the top brass are sweeping the army. Everyone is curious to see who is going to replace Defence Secretary Wanasinghe, and whether army commander Lieutenant General Gerry de Silva will also be axed.

Many of those close to the new President believe that Wanasinghe will be replaced by a civilian, merely to run the ministry bureaucracy, rather than fight the war.

Meanwhile, three new Russian Mi-17 transport helicopters arrived in Colombo this week. They will add strength to the three choppers which have been operating for two years carrying

troops and supplies to isolated camps in the north.

However, there was no reaction from the government about press reports that the Rs. 3.5 billion deal for warships, transport planes, helicopters, and armoured personnel carriers, which it suspended in August, is to go ahead.

Meanwhile, the military is furious over newspaper reports that an LTTE arms ship carrying ten tons of explosives, as well as other vessels, had left a Ukrainian port and was heading for Sri Lanka. The military has ordered an investigation into how the news leaked out.

The ship apparently did not complete its voyage, following the press reports. Both the Sri Lankan and Indian navies and air forces had been waiting for it, as the Indians did very successfully in January 1992, when they cornered a ship carrying arms with senior LTTE leader Sathiasivam Krishnakumar alias Kittu on board. This ship was blown up by the crew, with Kittu dying in the explosion.