

Sunday 14th November, 1993

THE ISLAND

# Tigers score their biggest victory

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The rebels last week scored their biggest military victory over government forces when sea-borne raiders swooped down on Nagathivanthurai naval base and the Pooneryn Army camp and swiftly proceeded to take control of the area. The highly successful rebel amphibious assault shocked the D. B. Wijetunga administration and the entire defence establishment currently under fire for the ill-fated Yal Devi offensive which resulted in the deaths of 118 personnel including seven officers and the loss of two T-55 tanks (MBT) last month.

The attack on the Army and Navy positions had commenced in the early hours of Thursday. Apparently our troops were not prepared for rebel assault," one officer said.

However Tamils and diplomatic circles were expecting some major operation to mark leader V. Prabhakaran's 39 birthday which falls later this month.

The Army had captured Pooneryn and Sangupiddi in late October 91 in an amphibious assault. A small force of men were able to secure a beachhead at Comar, south of the military run Mandaitivu island and then proceed to Pooneryn area. Only lost three men in particular operation," officers said.

Now the rebels have

re-captured the area after a fierce confrontation with the Naval and Army units which had been forced to vacate their positions. And at the same time the rebels had been able to block two determined attempts by the security forces to relieve forces trapped in the Pooneryn area by inducing fresh troops into the battle zone, officers said Friday night.

"We tried twice to carry out an amphibious assault to secure a beachhead west of Pooneryn," officers said. The aim was to secure a beachhead and then seek the destruction of powerful enemy units now hunting for the Naval and Army ground troops who had escaped the initial rebel attack.

At the time of the rebel attack Pooneryn was controlled by the first battalion of the Ceylon Light Infantry (CLI) commanded by lieutenant colonel T. J. R. de Silva, third battalion of the Gemunu Watch (GW) commanded by Major Daalagala and armour, artillery and other support units.

There had been about 1,500 soldiers and a couple of hundred Navy personnel at the Nagathivanthurai base.

## Biggest

The Pooneryn and the Nagathivanthurai defences were the biggest to crumble under rebel bombardment in the

Eelam War, defence analysts said. Initial communications between the troops trapped in Pooneryn and outside indicated that rebels have captured five 120mm mortars, one Armoured Personnel carrier (recovery vehicle), hundreds of assault rifles, ammunition boxes, communication equipment, and other military hardware. The rebels have also either captured or destroyed five Navy patrol boats, radar equipment, one Chinese Armoured Personnel carrier and everything that could not be moved away.

Informed sources said two Czechoslovakian built T-55 Main Battle Tanks worth Rs. 7.2 million and two Soviet built T-55 Main Battle Tanks worth Rs. 7.2 million had been either destroyed or captured by the attackers within the first few hours of fighting described by analysts as the fiercest ever.

Officers said the losses, damages, compensation to families of personnel of the Nagathivanthurai - Pooneryn debacle and expenditure incurred in efforts to take back the Pooneryn area, could run into well over one hundred million rupees.

The rebels were able to seize about 70 million rupees worth weapons other military hardware in raids on Kaddaikadu camp in the peninsula on October 1 last year and Janakapura in late July this year.

Officers said the seizure of five 120mm mortars with a range of 8km would pose a considerable danger to major

security forces facilities in the north east region. Even Palaly airbase, Vavuniya and Mandaitivu island would not be safe from 120mm mortars in the future.

The mortars could be used against major targets with devastating success. The rebels a few weeks back removed a powerful naval gun when they blew up an Israeli built Fast Attack Craft (FAC) off Point Pedro.

## Precarious

Officers admitted the security situation could become precarious if the rebels had taken away the five Naval boats missing following the Thursday's attack. About two years back Sea Tigers seized a following the Thursday's attack. About two years back Sea Tigers seized a 30' feet long inshore patrol craft off Mandaitivu and if they have captured five more vessels built for the Sri Lanka Navy the Sea Tigers could increase pressure on the security forces particularly naval bases including Elara (Karainagar). Elara is the headquarters to the Naval units operating in the northern naval area.

The current efforts were to organise an operation aimed at saving the units trapped in Pooneryn officers said.

They said only 48 Navy and 12 Army personnel had escaped the attack and reached the recently established Elephant Pass Navy base. "They are the only survivors upto Friday night," senior military officers said.

About 150 rebels, including women and about 250 security forces men



LTTE recruits with cyanide capsules around their necks

and officers had been killed within the first nine hours of fighting. Officers said the rebels may try to force the remaining Army and Navy units to surrender and take them to Jaffna.

Defence analysts believe that the remaining Army and Navy units could not continue to repulse rebel advances on them unless the military high command finds some way to induct fresh troops into the area.

The first two attempts to induct troops have failed officers said. Combined efforts to launch amphibious assaults to secure beachheads west of Pooneryn had been effectively blocked by rebels thus forcing the forces trapped in Pooneryn to defend themselves.

"Time is running out," officers admitted while predicting further security forces losses within the next 24 hours unless troop reinforcements enter the battle zone.

Officers described the Pooneryn debacle as the worst so far faced by the security forces in the Eelam War. They said the elite Army commandos and the sixth battalion of the Gemunu Watch (GW) would lead the ground offensive to save the trapped forces.

While the security forces commanders were trying to save remaining units in Pooneryn the rebels have inducted fresh groups to bolster the men who overran the defences. Analysts said the rebels have two routes to

send supplies to Pooneryn and evacuate the wounded. The attack had helped the rebels to take the full control of the Kilali sea route and the Sangupiddi causeway thus allowing the rebel high command to reinforce units in Pooneryn area.

Army officers believe the rebels would try to hold onto the area at any cost. The seizure of Pooneryn - Sangupiddi would help the rebels to maintain a supply route between the mainland and the Jaffna peninsula.

The rebels used Pooneryn-Sangupiddi route extensively until the Army captured the area in late October 91.

## Strategic victory

Officers admitted that rebels have been able to score a strategic victory over the government security forces. In the past few years the seizure of all entry points to Jaffna by the security forces was a part of the highly ambitious defence strategy aimed at defeating the rebels militarily.

However with the fall of two key bases within a day and the failure of the security forces at least to save the trapped units in Pooneryn had increased fears among political and defence officials of an impending disaster analysts

said. The war has entered a new stage analysts said. The rebel success and the swiftness of the strike and the failure to send reinforcements had created a precarious situation they said.

The entire defence and political strategy to defeat the rebels aid pave the way for local government elections in the sensitive Eastern province could be badly affected as a result of the Pooneryn debacle.

Officers said they have to secure the area and then proceed to build up new Army and Naval facilities. Without new camps the security forces have no chance of blocking rebel and civilian supply routes between the mainland and the peninsula.

The Pooneryn disaster has come less than five months after the destruction of the Janakapura base set up to protect settlements there.

Nearly 20 million rupees worth arms, ammunition and other military items were removed in that attack. Both attacks had taken place within the area that come under the second Army division (northern division).

The top brass must investigate and take steps to prevent set backs. Analysts said both political and military miscalculations have resulted in tragedies in the Eelam war.

Kpkavil, Mankulam and Pooneryn Nagathivanthurai were lost. The Army could not afford to lose more men and material.

The authorities must first admit that the rebels were good fighters capable of attacking swiftly and creating major security problem.

## Big news

Informed sources said the rebels have commenced using the Pooneryn success for a propaganda blitz against the government and its security forces. The details and the success of the rebel operation had become big news, both in Asian and western countries sources said.

Meanwhile President D. B. Wijetunga had held talks with the security top brass. The President has indicated that he does not like excuses but wants immediate action to save the trapped troops and take control of the area.

The Pooneryn attack had come about two months after President Wijetunga made some key changes in the command and control structure of the security forces with a view to defeating the rebels militarily.

The President had placed the war machine under a special defence co-ordinating committee headed by the defence secretary General Hamilton Wansinghe after disbanding the Joint Operations Command (JOC) which failed to deliver goods, analysts said.

Analysts said every security strategy and other political and cover moves to defeat rebels would fail if they successfully halt a rescue operation and force the remaining personnel to surrender.



Victims of LTTE terror