

# Military machoism?

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By Our Defence Correspondent

The PA Government's apparent differences with Defence Secretary Hamilton Wanasinghe, and some senior officers of the Sri Lankan Army, which have been simmering from long before the General Elections, publicly aired this week.

In a televised interview with the BBC, Chandrika Kumaratunga stated, "Most armies prefer war to peace; not soldiers at the base, but those at the top, who are in Colombo," she said.

When asked by BBC interviewer George Arney whether the top brass of the armed services had vested interests in the continuation of the war the Prime Minister said, "I don't think I should comment on that." Her reluctance to defend the integrity of senior army officers was obvious.

She went further to say, "that the army had reigned supreme up to now, and had been a government unto themselves. Their attitude is that we cannot decide anything on our own. We have to get permission from them. Our government is not willing to tolerate this." Ms. Kumaratunga warned.

She was explicit that the army would not be allowed to interfere in the Government's effort to end the war, noting that the previous government did not have sufficient control over the army.

While no one in the army would want to contradict her openly, Defence sources say the morale of the army plunged with these comments.

Although it is common knowledge that there had been no love lost between some senior army officers in Colombo and Ms. Kumaratunga, the Prime Minister unfortunately referred to the army as a whole, not specifically mentioning which senior officers, she was talking about.

The military is in fact, probably the only branch of government which has had major problems with the transition of power from the UNP to the PA.

Most other top ministry officials, diplomats and corporation heads have either resigned voluntarily or left discreetly and without ceremony after being quietly told to go by their respective ministers or being transferred to other posts. But the top brass of the armed services and police who have spent most of their lives in one particular occupation, were unable to quit and take up other jobs.

The battle line between the Defence Secretary and some of the army top brass on one side and the new government on the other, were drawn long before the election as Defence Secretary, General Wanasinghe used his authority to purchase a large number of military items such as aircraft, guns, tanks, gun-boats etc. from various countries.

It was a tactic of the PA, when it was in the opposition to raise questions concerning these purchases in Parliament with Colombo District MP, C.V. Gooneratne who is now the Minister of Industrial Development, being extremely vocal about allegations of improprieties in arms deals.

Although every arms deal was made with the permission of President D.B. Wijetunga, Gen. Wanasinghe, rightfully or wrongfully came in for much criticism from the then opposition.

In fact, one of the first acts of Prime Minister Kumaratunga was to cancel a Rs. 3.5 billion

arms deal which had been pushed through very hurriedly by the Defence Ministry shortly before the General Elections.

The deal was for three gun-boats, seven helicopters and hundreds of armed personnel carriers from Russia. General Wanasinghe himself led the military delegation to Russia a few months before the election.

The new government found that a dummy company had, allegedly, been set up in Singapore to receive the payments and the PA Government immediately froze all further payments. By this time, 10 per cent of the money had already been paid.

Shortly afterwards, a report by the army engineers was leaked to the press, charging that the APC's, some of which had already been delivered, were actually old vehicles, although they were supposed to be brand new.

Unfortunately, with the constitution clearly stating that the President must hold the portfolio of defence minister, any attempt on the government's part to remove Gen. Wanasinghe and his staff, and any changes among the army top brass, will quite clearly have to wait until after the presidential poll on November 9.

Thus the relationship between the government and the military has been strained. In fact, when the new Prime Minister met senior police officers at Temple Trees for the first time in late August, Mrs. Kumaratunga had clearly told them that anyone who did not like working for the PA government was free to leave immediately.

But while the police, air force and senior navy officers seem to have quite diplomatically decided to allow discretion to be the better part of valour and follow the orders of the new government without grumbling, some in the army seem to have

decided otherwise.

There are several problems the army is facing with the new government. The first is the problem of senior army officers being arrested and remanded for mass killings during the violence of the JVP revolution from 1987 to 1990.

Up to now ten army men, including Brigadier Parry Liyanage, have been arrested. This has alarmed many in the military, who feel that pictures of army officers in handcuffs, and the names of such officers being repeated over and over again in newspapers and on radio and television was nothing but a public humiliation.

Some in the army feel that they are paying the price of the PA election promise to investigate the killings. But Justice Minister G.L. Peiris made no apologies about it at last week's news briefing, when he said that the nation must know what happened during that time, and who was killed by whom, and why, no matter what the military felt.

Dr Peiris said that despite several army officers expressing their opposition, the government would not interfere with the exhumation of mass graves by magistrates throughout the country. "To interfere would be tantamount to contempt of court."

But the biggest problem the army faces is the uncertainty over whether the government will give away its hard fought gains over the past few years, as President Premadasa's regime did in the last peace talks.

Despite Deputy Defence Minister, Anuruddha Ratwatte, personally touring camps in the north and east to explain to soldiers, sailors, airmen, and policemen that the government would not make the same mistakes, and be fooled by the LTTE, the soldiers' fears still persist.

The first round of peace talks last week heightened these fears even further, with the government agreeing to consider the LTTE demand for the reopening of the Pooneerny-Sanguppiddy supply route to the Jaffna Peninsula. One point which alarms the army in particular is that they would have to move the Pooneerny army camp out of rifle range of the road, as the Tigers want, and allow all supplies to pass to the peninsula without being checked.

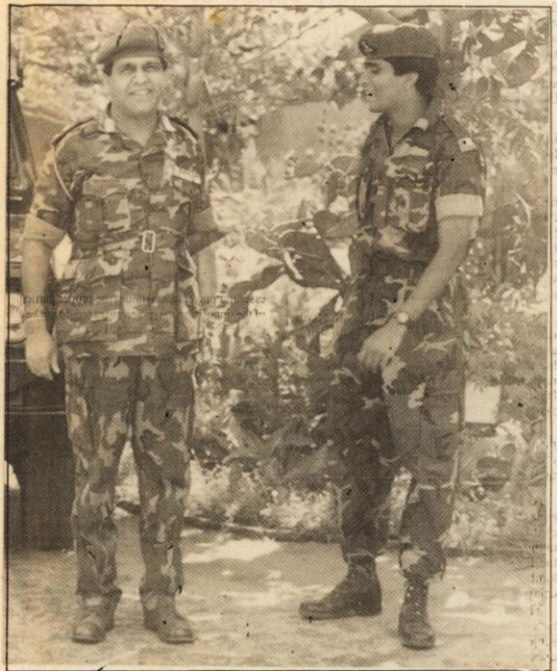
This would allow the LTTE to build up its strength during the peace talks, with weapons that would be used on the army if peace talks breakdown again.

Pooneerny is a sore point with the army, after last November's slaughter in which over 400 soldiers were killed and 600 wounded, and even more LTTE cadres died. It was the worst loss of life in the history of the army and the navy, and every effort was made to retake the peninsula, which is one of only two land routes to Jaffna.

Pooneerny was captured by the LTTE when the war broke out again in 1990, and was retaken in an amphibious operation in late 1991, commanded by the late Lieutenant General Denzil Kobekaduwa.

What the army fears is that opening up this route for supplies and civilian traffic to and from Jaffna might allow the LTTE to attack Pooneerny and overrun it whenever it pleases. In fact, if the causeway linking the mainland and Jaffna is rebuilt, as it surely will be if the route is opened, the Tigers will be able to rush reinforcements through from Jaffna, not just to attack Pooneerny, but to any battle anywhere in the north and east, within a matter of hours.

This would seriously endanger the army's superiority in other areas as well.



In fatigues: Defence Secretary Hamilton Wanasinghe (Left)

The Prime Minister on the other hand, while having acknowledged that soldiers must be kept informed of what is happening, and also better looked after, seems to have reservations about top brass whom she feels have done little in the past few years to end the war.

In a new development, Army Commander Gerry Silva in consultation with his senior colleagues, had reportedly sought a meeting with the Prime

Minister on Thursday. A senior Army Officer, when asked about this said that though not confirmed, there's reason to believe that the army chief's request may have been turned down.

Meanwhile, the army and the navy have been placed on maximum alert after military intelligence warned of a major attack by the LTTE before the November 9 election.

"The LTTE seems to be convinced the recent attacks launched to put pressure on the Government to declare a cessation of hostilities may have done the trick. Probably, Prabhakaran feels one more pinch in the back would force the PA Government to make a firm stance in declaring a ceasefire a top military official said. The isolation of the military by the new Government was best summed up by the official who simply quipped "it's our turn to say Quo Vadis?"