

'Do not play with fire'

By Our Defence Correspondent

The former UNP Presidential Candidate Gamini Dissanayake's profound warning to the PA Presidential Candidate Chandrika Kumartunga, "do not play with fire" appears to be stronger at his death than when alive.

Intelligence and security agencies warned Mr. Dissanayake of an impending plan to assassinate him in the first week of October. Even though Mr. Dissanayake did not enjoy an excellent rapport with the defence authorities unlike his former colleague Lalith Athulathmudali, professionalism prevailed and even the source of the threat was revealed to him. They were specific in describing even the manner in which the LTTE was planning to kill him.

They had assessed correctly that the LTTE had feared Mr. Dissanayake's ascent to power primarily because of the good relations Mr. Dissanayake enjoyed with New Delhi, particularly with the Congress I party. It was well known that with the ending of the Rajiv Gandhi murder trial, India had to take some strong measures against the LTTE and they could have done so only with political support from Sri Lanka. Mr. Dissanayake, who played a crucial role in the Indo-Lanka Accord, was India's best friend.

The LTTE was also aware that their honeymoon with Ms. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumartunga may last less than a year. The LTTE's foreign intelligence section had also reported that in 1993, India had passed a law empowering the operation of Indian troops beyond their territorial jurisdiction on criminal matters. The visit of Sethival, an Indian legal eagle to consult his US counterparts to study the extradition of Noriega and review the Israeli process of bringing Nazi war criminals to trial, was known to them.

Like the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi prompted the reinduction of the IPKF, the LTTE assessed, the elimination of Gamini Dissanayake would weaken the India-Sri Lanka alliance.

Despite taking security precautions, from changing schedules to boosting up the number of guards, the LTTE closed in on Mr. Dissanayake by exploiting the virtual absence of protection against a suicide bomber. The assassinations of Rajiv Gandhi of India and R. Premadasa of Sri Lanka, had proved the effectiveness of the closely guarded Black Tiger operations by physically and psychologically war trained cadres of the LTTE.

Like the LTTE denied the murders of Rajiv Gandhi, Ranjan Wijeratne, R. Premadasa, Lalith Athulathmudali, they would deny the murder of Gamini Dissanayake. An LTTE cadre who served as a bodyguard to Prabhakaran once reasoned, "If LTTE accepts the killing of civilians, the West would brand us as a terrorist organisation. This will pose a major difficulty to us because we have offices, the world over, including an International secretariat in London." He added, "You may recall Mahataya admitting the murder of Amirthalingam in Colombo. Prabhakaran reprimanded him



The Dissanayake couple with their supporters after Gamini was selected as UNP's Presidential candidate.

for that. It is our policy, we deny killing civilians, whether they are in Colombo or in the border villages.

Among the Sri Lankan security community, it is not a secret that Mr. Dissanayake had come to the attention of the LTTE from the early 1980s and had become a target of the LTTE since the time he broke away from the UNP and formed the DUNF. The LTTE had the habit of closely monitoring not only government but opposition politicians, because the strengths and the weaknesses of the southern politics had a direct bearing on their destiny.

IPKF episode

The tasking for engaging in long range and deep penetration operations was the responsibility of Pottu Amman, who directly reported to the LTTE chief Vepupillai Prabhakaran. Pottu an Indian trained senior cadre, proved his abilities to Prabhakaran during the IPKF episode, and became a prominent leader of the LTTE in the post-IPKF phase. Today, he is regarded as a specialist in operational intelligence, where ground intelligence is made use of almost immediately to weaken the enemy.

Mr. Dissanayake earned the wrath of the LTTE for two reasons. Primarily, for his role in the induction of the IPKF and secondarily, for his leading role in the burning of the library in Jaffna nearly one and a half decades ago. There is no conclusive evidence to prove that he had a hand in the burning of the library — had there been, his political opponent R. Premadasa would have used it against him. For Prabhakaran, eliminating Mr. Dissanayake was imperative — he was an enemy of the Tamils and he was a potential threat.

Like President Premadasa was

being monitored by the LTTE for over two years, Mr. Dissanayake too came under their physical surveillance from the time he tried to impeach President Premadasa. It is well known that while India pledged their support to Mr. Dissanayake, the LTTE pledged their support to save President Premadasa, who supported a dialogue with the LTTE. During the impeachment, the LTTE offered Mr. Premadasa the support of the EROS Members of Parliament, who were in Jaffna and at the hands of the LTTE.

LTTE's access to Mr. Dissanayake was through his party colleague, Mr. G.M. Premachandra. Both Mr. Dissanayake and Mr. Premachandra wanted the Rajaliya (Eagle) newspaper translated and printed in Tamil and had solicited for Tamil journalists, both sub editors and reporters, from their Tamil colleagues in Colombo. When the LTTE received this information they decided to exploit this offer.

The LTTE knew that Mr. Nalliah, a retired Director of Education for Jaffna, was a political colleague of Mr. Dissanayake. Mr. Nalliah had been a UNP organizer in Jaffna and had known almost all the prominent members of the Jayewardene cabinet. Mr. Nalliah's son, an LTTE cadre was in prison for a minor offence. The LTTE said that if Mr. Nalliah was to assist them, they would release his son. Mr. Nalliah who wanted to bring his family to Colombo agreed.

Tamil newspaper

The LTTE requested Mr. Nalliah to proceed to Colombo and to meet up with Mr. Dissanayake and Mr. Premachandra. Mr. Nalliah was to stay with a relative, but the LTTE paid lavishly for his transport and other expenses. After a successful meeting, Mr. Dissanayake requested Mr. Nal-

liah for assistance to wean away the Tamil people from the LTTE. Mr. Dissanayake also said that Mr. Nalliah must help him to find some people to work in the Tamil newspaper he hopes to launch and in the Tamil press. Mr. Nalliah was delighted and agreed to help his old friend.

Upon his return to Jaffna, Mr. Nalliah was debriefed by Pottu Amman, the LTTE's Chief of Intelligence. Mr. Nalliah was despatched again to Colombo with an LTTE cadre trained in surveillance. The cadre promptly enrolled at Polytechnic school in Wellawatte to justify his stay in Colombo. Mr. Nalliah introduced this young man to Mr. Premachandra as a boy from Jaffna who needs employment in Colombo. Mr. Nalliah said that he had been victimized by the LTTE. Both Mr. Premachandra and Mr. Dissanayake took a liking to this young man and discussed many matters openly.

After a while, this cadre returned to Jaffna, and based on the information he provided a team of Black Tigers were inducted to Colombo. They were entrusted with the task of collecting information about Mr. Dissanayake particularly who his frequent visitors were and where he travelled, his habits, etc. The LTTE also requested to note down the numbers of the cars used by the members of his family.

For a prolonged period, LTTE operatives, observed him at least from two locations. The operatives, trained in long range surveillance monitored him constantly from the road in front of the Galle Face Hotel and from the road leading to his residence next to the British Council in Kollupitiya and reported their findings to Jaffna. Even though one member of this surveillance team was netted by the security forces in Colombo, they could not arrest

members of the subsequent team which came from Jaffna. It was this subsequent team which was tasked to eliminate him. But information had reached the eyes and the ears of the security authorities of this hit team.

Peace talks

It can be speculated that one of the main reasons the Sri Lankan security forces operating in Colombo failed to apprehend LTTE operatives in the city was because of the on going talks between the Government and the LTTE. It is natural that apathy sets into troops when they hear that the Government is releasing LTTE prisoners whom they had apprehended at great risk and cost and that the Government had lifted the embargo. The Government permitting crates of cement which the LTTE used for the construction of bunkers and shelters and thousands of batteries for making anti personnel mines. Permitting such goods to travel up north had wounded the morale of the security forces.

The assassination of Gamini Dissanayake, a potential president, clearly demonstrates two aspects. Firstly, the LTTE has begun to govern the politics in the South. Had the LTTE not assassinated the then Defence State Minister Ranjan Wijeratne or the former National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali, either of them could have succeeded R. Premadasa as the President. With their suicide bomb technology, it is clear that the LTTE will continue to decide who should govern the South. Secondly, the LTTE has given a clear message to Ms. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumartunga. Often political leaders do not understand such signals, or they prefer to ignore such signals but eventually, sooner or later, they have to come to terms with the reality.