

Foray after foray towards Periyamadu. (1999, October 31). The Sunday times.



Troops in a drill in Elephant Pass Pic by Alfred Silva

Foray after foray towards Periyamadu

The onset of monsoons and an early Presidential poll notwithstanding, security forces continued their thrust against the LTTE in the Wanni this week.

On Thursday, troops of the 55 Division resumed Phase Two of "Operation Watershed". In what seemed to be a limited operation, troops manning the defence lines on the Olamadu-Odussudan axis (along Mankulam - Muthuayankaddu highway) were advancing northwards. They were to encompass the Muthuayankaddu tank and link up with troops north east of Ampakam, areas captured during the first phase of "Operation Watershed" from October 14 to 17.

Like in the launch of the first phase of the operation, the Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence cautiously left out any reference to the second phase in a news release issued on Thursday. The news release said:

"During early hours of 28 October 1999 Security Forces in Wanni who had been conducting operations in Ampakam East stepped up their operations with the troops of 53 and 55 Divisions....."

In another news release on Friday, the Op HQ added: "at 0800 hrs on 28 October 1999, a clearing operation in Ampakam East, ground troops confirm 42 terrorists have been killed and have recovered 27 terrorist bodies along with 18 T-56 weapons, 01 LMG (Light Machine Gun), 01 communication radio set and a belt order. Total number of Security Forces casualties are 05 killed and 53 injured including minor casualties."

Like during the first phase, the daily Observer of Friday (October 29), however, disclosed what the Op HQ press release had chosen to cautiously avoid. In its main story headlined "SECURITY FORCES RELAUNCH OPERATION WATERSHED" the Observer said "security forces launched the Phase II of Operation Watershed at Ampakam area last afternoon....."

When the first phase of the operation was launched, the Op HQ claimed in a press release on October 14 that "terrorists launched an attack on the forward defence line." However, the Observer of October 15 disclosed that "Operation Watershed" had been launched. And now, the Op HQ claims of "clearing operations in Ampakam east", the Observer has revealed, was in fact the resumption of phase two.

That is not all. The Sirep, or the daily situation report circulated to security forces top brass, officials of the defence establishment and selected Government leaders also declared that Phase II of "Operation Watershed" was launched on October 28. In what seemed a retaliatory strike to the launch of phase two of "Operation Watershed", Tiger guerrillas fired an artillery and mortar barrage on the Elephant Pass defences. But most of them hit the Army's Field Hospital located near the 54 Brigade area. A Nais Nurse and a soldier

were killed and 21 other soldiers were injured.

The incident occurred shortly after 6.30 p.m. on October 28. A group of guerrilla officers were going through their routine physical training exercises. Soldiers from the camps closest to the Field Hospital had availed themselves of the evening tuck to meet the only doctor on duty. The morning rains have been assigned to those in camps which are distant from the hospital.

The falling artillery and mortar had rapped the roof of the hospital. One had fallen a few feet away from the Doctors' quarters. Acting General Officer Commanding the 54 Division, Brigadier K.B. Egodawala, had arranged for two SLAF helicopters to land in the area within an hour to airlift the injured to the Paliy Military Hospital. Later, he also cleared a team from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to visit the scene, interview eye witnesses and take photographs of the damage caused.

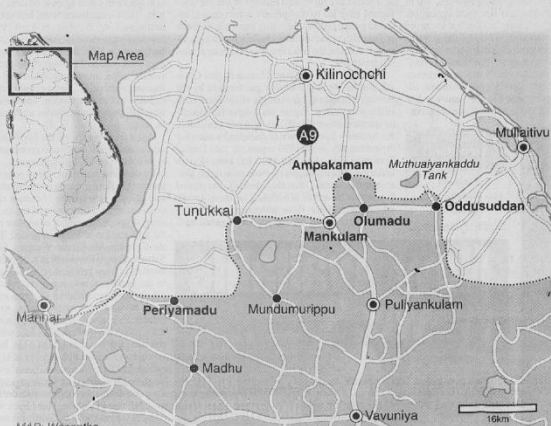
As was also a 1.6 km. bus to represent the Field Hospital as a target. Both the Army and Tiger guerrillas, usually avoid hospitals and civilian concentrations under their respective control during confrontations. Army officials were also equally infuriated that efforts to shift the Field Hospital, which they were all along were vulnerable to artillery/mortar attacks to a safe location had failed.

Major General Sarath Manandage, GOC of the 54 Division, they said, had written to the Engineering Services division's Army Headquarters asking for cement and gne shee to establish a Field Hospital in a safe location. It has been turned down on the grounds that tanks were not available. Thereafter, Maj Gen. Manandage is reported to have shifted part of the Field Hospital to the engineering services available within his command. It was the remaining part of the hospital that was hit.

Army officials said that the artillery/mortar fired were a mixture of 120 mm and 140 mm ones. They are puzzled that the 140 mm artillery, now obsolete and not used by militaries in any part of the world, were still in vogue with the LTTE.

As reported in these columns (Situation Report - October 24), troops had planned to encompass Muthuayankaddu during the first phase of "Operation Watershed". However, continued Tiger guerrilla resistance put paid to these efforts. The ferocity of the confrontation can be gauged from the Army's use of artillery fire. Nearly 20,000 rounds had been fired during the three day long operation, a very expensive exercise taking into consideration the human and material losses that led to the gain of some 12 square kilometers.

However, the offensive east of Ampakam appeared to overshadow another "major" military thrust launched on Friday night. It is not immediately clear whether this is also part of the second phase of "Operation Watershed" but the



SITUATION REPORT



BY IQBAL ATHAS

aim of this offensive was to encircle or re-capture the village of Periyamadu - a task that failed during the infamous "Operation Rana Gosa 5". As reported in these columns, the last phase of Rana Gosa ended in a fiasco with troops who broke out from their defences from two broad fronts being forced to return to their original positions within hours.

On Friday night, troops from the Air Mobile Brigade attacked guerrilla defences and paved the way for troops from the Army's 53 Division to advance by yesterday morning. Details of how the operation was proceeding cannot be divulged since

troops were engaged in heavy fighting in terrain that has become very soggy due to heavy rains.

But senior officials of the security establishment were embarrassed that news of the latest operation towards Periyamadu had leaked out before its launch. The widely accessed website Tamilar, in a report headlined "Imminent offensive will trigger catastrophe" on October 27, a day before the operation, gave the following account:

"An imminent offensive by the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) in the Wanni will cause a 'massive displacement of tens of thousands of people with no

shelter provisions whatever in the adjoining areas, triggering a major catastrophe," said the London based Tamil Information Centre in a press release today.

"The TIC learns that the Sri Lanka government Army is planning a major offensive in the Wanni, an area where over 457,000 people live under miserable conditions, 90% of whom are displaced people, including women, elderly and children," the statement said.

"The TIC further learns that thousands of Sri Lanka troops are being moved into the remote areas of Palampadiy, Keerisuddan and Inraai Huppaikalam with heavy military equipment and armaments," it said.

"A major military operation is imminent, which according to social workers will result in a serious crisis and the lives of refugees are at risk, the TIC added. . ."

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"An imminent offensive by the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) in the Wanni will cause a 'massive displacement of tens of thousands of people with no

political panache. On the other hand, it will not be in the interests of the governing Alliance to blow up the military side of politics in the run up to the presidential elections."

This would be counter-productive to that part of the political campaign, which seeks a vote to end the prolonged separatist war through political negotiation. Military victories may influence the support of the Sinhala electorate in as much as operational losses would have the opposite effect.

However, whereas the vote base of the Sinhala electorate is more or less traditional, its military side of governance in as much as the Tamil vote would be on the question of militarism. And that is the vote that which can influence the outcome of the elections.

All aspects considered, it is unlikely that the next few months will see any significant increase in the momentum of military operations. Both political and monsoon conditions determine so. With general elections to follow next year, the pattern of military operations is unlikely to alter. The requirement for communal unity to make political gains will over ride military realities.

One possible cause emerged from the battle area of the Wanni yesterday. For several days last week, hectic preparations for Friday's offensive have been under way. Artillery guns that were being moved to designated locations got bogged down in the muddy terrain caused by heavy rains. In one instance, it took nearly two days to pull out trailers with guns stuck in the mud. Cranes and recovery vehicles had to be used. The load dia caused by the cranes and other movement would have given LTTE spotters indications of a possible build up for an offensive.

The launching of phase two of "Operation Watershed" confirms that the Army has changed its strategy in the Wanni since abandoning the grandiose and expensive "Operation Jaya Sikuru" (Victory Assured) to link Vavuniya with Jaffna in a one shot operation. The new strategy, commencing with "Operation Rana Gosa" and now Watershed, have less ambitious aims.

The broad front approach also compels the LTTE to deploy in a wider area in defence and so restrict their initiative by denying them the freedom to concentrate their limited power. This is a big advantage, both militarily and politically.

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the narrow single axis of Jaya Sikuru, the new series of operations inch into LTTE controlled areas as opposed to juggernaut style conventional advances, which proved to be frustrating in the guerrilla scenario. The new strategy is logistically easier, especially by denying them the freedom to concentrate their limited power. This is a big advantage, both militarily and politically.

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The Jungle Telegraph
By Alia

Sigh of relief

The future of the Joint Operations Command which came up for review at the highest levels of the Government has been put on hold.

The reason, President Chandrika Bandaranayake Kumaratunga's decision to call for Presidential elections 16 months ahead of schedule.

The news is certainly a sigh of relief for staff of the JOC including its head or General Officer Commanding (GOC), General Rohan de S. Daluwatte.

There was more good news for Gen. Daluwatte last week. The Ministry of Defence has nominated him as Sri Lanka's representative at the Indo-Pacific heads of defence services conference in Hawaii. The conference is being hosted by US Army's Pacific Command and will take place from November 14 to 17.

Revelation

Eric Savundranayagam, whom Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) detectives are now interrogating for his alleged involvement in the assassination of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam, made an interesting revelation.

The man who reportedly handled many surveillance tasks to pave the way for Tiger hit squads to attack was not only advised by his LTTE handlers to enter the Technical College at Maradana to follow an engineering course. Detectives say he has also been told to enrol himself to follow a Hindu language course at the Indira College, Madras. It seemed his handlers had planned on an Indian assignment for him. He followed both courses and he went to Madras for his sister's wedding. He was arrested upon his return.

Others irked

Top cops are irked over one of their retired colleagues. Though he retired last year, he continues to occupy official quarters.

This is whilst others who retired have been ordered to leave. Financial Regulations which allow one calendar month's stay after retirement, the top cops complain, does not apply to him.

Backfired

The ambitious seafarer's ploy to edge out his boss with the revelation that he leaked extremely sensitive info to media has backfired.

The sleuths have found that the "disclosures", which came late rapid fire from a Naval gun at close quarters, or shall I say face to face, were all part of a ding dong battle to become chief.

He wanted to be at the helm of things, come hell or high water. The talk at the sea front now, insiders say, is about the "hull down" position the man has taken after a plea for a longer term has been politely declined. "The man did" not know the boss was well aware of his treacherous acts."

Foot ups

The Ministry of Defence is to advise heads of armed services to obtain formal clearance of their lists for official functions.

The move, intended to avoid embarrassment to the Government, follows a string of foul ups during the Army's 50th anniversary celebrations. The latest report spoke of two former officers, who were suspects in the 1962 coup attempt, being invited for the gala anniversary dinner.