

Army gets set under new command. (1993, December 12). *The Sunday Times.*

THE SUNDAY TIMES, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1993

PAGE SEVEN

OP/ED

Army gets set under new command

By The Sunday Times Defence Correspondent

If there were signs that the stalemate situation in the separatist war continued in the past week, there were indications too that the lull in the political and defence establishments running the military machine would end beginning next week.

President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga, is next week expected to name Major General Gerry de Silva, as acting Commander of the Sri Lanka Army. He will succeed Lt. Gen. Cecil Waidyaratne, who is due to go on leave preparatory to retirement.

Since the decision of Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne to retire became public, there have been reservations that a delay in naming a successor had left the Army, the largest armed force in the country, without a leader. This was in the backdrop of there being no political leadership in the form of a Minister of State for Defence.

Whilst the naming of a new Commander will obviate such criticism to a larger degree, highly placed political sources do not rule out the possibility of President, D.B. Wijetunga, naming a Minister of State for Defence. One choice, these sources said, could be Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has been playing the de facto role as the State Minister.

At present Premier Wickremesinghe is handling the responsibility of dealing with security forces and Police on behalf of President Wijetunga, who is both Minister of Defence and Commander in Chief of the armed forces. A move to appoint a State Minister for Defence, the same sources said, could be a precursor towards mobilising a national effort to help the security forces to weaken the LTTE and restore fuller Government control in terrorism stricken areas.

Last week, The Sunday Times (December 5) reported that Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne, has applied for early retirement and has been offered a diplomatic posting.

As the report said, his decision came after a meeting on December 1 with President Wijetunga and Premier Wickremesinghe. Also taking part were Defence Secretary, General Hamilton Wanasinghe and General Sepala Attygalle, Security Advisor to the President. The meeting is learnt to have taken place before the commencement of the weekly National Security Council session.

Two days later, on December 3, Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne wrote to President Wijetunga conveying his decision to retire from December 31 and giving his own views on some of the matters relating to it.

The next day (December 4) Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne, himself hinted at his impending retirement when he



Battle and the booty: LTTE rebels inspecting the captured T-55 battle tank

addressed a previously scheduled conference of Regimental Commanders. Whilst critically assessing the performance of various regiments, in what would seem to be a moment of anger he had remarked that he did not want to command a "failing Army." Reuters news agency which reported the Army Commander's impending early retirement quoted the statement thus bringing him into the centre of another controversy.

Barring that aside, the whole week was predominated with speculation both in political and military circles. The talking point was changes, and the rumour mill took over. Following on its heels were the multitude of petitions, signed and anonymous - an exercise which has become part of lobbying strategy nowadays.

This was while senior security officials in the north took a series of measures to counter LTTE cadre build ups in camps in the area, particularly in the Wannu and Mullaativu. There again offensive action had to wait for

such measures were directed from the highest levels. The imbroglio eased last Friday (December 10) when news began to circulate in the security establishment that President Wijetunga had accepted Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne's decision to retire and would name the acting Commander.

According to security sources, Defence Secretary, General Hamilton Wanasinghe, wrote to Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne, last Friday informing him that President Wijetunga had accepted his application for retirement with effect from December 31. In order to facilitate the appointment of an acting Commander, Gen. Wanasinghe is learnt to have asked Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne to inform him of the date from which he would go on leave prior to retirement.

The same sources said Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne has been advised not to make any changes, if they became necessary, without consulting the Chief of Staff, Major

General Gerry de Silva.

These sources said Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne would opt to go on leave from December 15 but there was no official confirmation of this till last night.

If Lt. Gen. Waidyaratne made the remark that he did not want to command a "failing Army," in a moment of anger, he was more composed in his chats with senior officers thereafter. He did not hide the fact that the remark was a mistake.

It did not do much to the Army morale which came under heavy strain after the Pooneryn disaster. On the civilian side, there were complaints that the remarks were a slur on the good General's own responsibilities.

Security forces intercepts of radio communications showed LTTE intelligence boss, Pottu Amman, seizing the remark to make an appeal to youth to join their ranks to demolish an Army which their own Com-

mander admits to be "failing." Pottu Amman also made a radio call asking the security forces to join hands with them since the Commander himself had termed it a "failing Army."

A month has elapsed since the disaster at Pooneryn. Though this confrontation was the worst setback the Sri Lanka Army has suffered in terms of human and equipment losses, there have been no significant territorial disadvantage which the LTTE could strategically exploit except to the vacuum created by the absence of a Naval presence in the lagoon.

This enables the LTTE unfettered movement across the lagoon and maintain the Wannu and the peninsula as a single operational unit though geographically separated. This is vitally important to the LTTE as the two units are complementary to maintain a viable operational base to sustain not only military operations but also for control of the population and their support.

The greatest benefit of this Pooneryn success to the LTTE was to pre-empt any threat to the Wannu-Peninsula axis.

Now, the general tactical situation on the northern front is more or less before the Pooneryn-Kilali confrontations - a general situation of stalemate.

In a stalemated situation, the war is likely to drag on into one of attrition where both sides will suffer human and equipment losses with little or no political or military progress. This is a situation which the Government must avoid.

It cannot afford to keep open a running sore to drain the nation economically. That can only be of advantage to the terrorists. It is in fact the objective of terrorism to drain its target economically and psychologically into a state of collapse and then exploit its political ambitions.

Thus, the period of consolidation is crucially important to the Government. It has to hone its pacification strategy in the Eastern Province towards a political advantage whilst re-vamping its military capabilities in the north.

The LTTE appear to be concentrating on re-energising the population, recruiting and re-organising its cadres.

There can be no pacification without military security. Equally, military measures, unless they lead to a political aim which leads to pacification, lacks meaning.

Both are complementary. Any setback to the re-organisation of the military effort is bound to have repercussions in the political handling of the north east situation in addition to weakening the military will and morale.