

2,000 DIE IN SHOWDOWN AT ELEPHANT PASS

A RELIEF COLUMN of over 10,000 Sri Lankan soldiers broke the three-week siege of a strategic Army base at Elephant Pass by Tamil Tiger (LTTE) guerrillas on 3 August in the biggest battle of the eight-year civil war.

After six months of trench warfare, 5,000 Tiger guerrillas launched a frontal assault on the Army base which guards the main road and rail links between the Jaffna peninsula and the mainland on 9 July. The Tiger's new 14.5mm artillery prevented an air rescue of 800 soldiers many seriously wounded, trapped inside the camp and Sri Lankan forces staged a massive amphibious landing at Vetrilaikerni six miles away on the isolated north-east coast.

Over nine battalions of Sri Lankan infantry were thrown into the fight as Tiger resistance and treacherous terrain prevented progress of more than a few hundred yards a day. As the Army advance bogged down in the shifting sands of Chundikulam, heavy shelling of civilian areas of the peninsula killed 60 people in Manipay, another 60 in Vadamaratchy and many more in outlying areas.

While Colombo newspapers fulminated at the Army's lack of progress, a Tiger directive ordered Jaffna General hospital's 400 beds cleared for LTTE casualties from Elephant Pass and another 300 wounded were evacuated to Point Pedro. The Army brought 300 tractor trailers by sea from Trincomalee and painfully ploughed its way from Mullian to Thantottam on the edge of Chundikulam lagoon in preparation for a dual thrust at the Tigers.

After 24 days of hand-to-hand fighting, defence sources announced that Sri Lankan troops had linked up with Elephant Pass camp and were pushing forward on its northern perimeter where heavy fighting continued. The Army claims over 2,000 LTTE guerrillas were killed and acknowledged the loss of 150 soldiers and another 600 wounded. The Tigers say they lost under 200 men and killed over 500 soldiers.

The Army may now drive home its numerical superiority and push on to Jaffna or turn south to strike at Kilinochchi. There is now widespread starvation in Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi after the three week blockade and a growing drought in Mannar and Vavuniya Districts.

Analysts say the Tigers had objectives at Elephant Pass beyond its strategic location and its heavy artillery - invaluable in the unequal struggle with the Sri Lankan Air force. As Army commander Lt Gen. Hamilton Wanasinghe conceded, the Tigers are no longer a small guerrilla outfit but a fully-fledged army capable of taking on the Sri Lankan military in large set-piece battles.

Whether Sri Lankan President Premadasa is now convinced that a military solution is no longer viable - as was the Tiger's intention - remains unclear. Hours after the relief of Elephant Pass Mr Premadasa again called for peace talks - as the LTTE did six weeks ago - but neither side can agree on preconditions.

This latest military escalation may signal "the beginning of the endgame", with both sides prepared to make ever increasing sacrifices in the pursuit of outright victory. The Tigers' dilemma is that as a guerrilla force they cannot be beaten by a conventional army but nor can they win.

No one knows if the Tigers have the strength to slug it out with the Sri Lankan Army but as the stakes get higher so will the urge to gamble.

MINISTERS MEET IN NEW DELHI

AFTER high-level talks in New Delhi in late July, India and Sri Lanka called for a political settlement to the war in northern Sri Lanka and the early and voluntary return of Sri Lankan refugees in south India. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Harold Herath and his Indian counterpart Mr M Solanki signed agreements to increase economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Observers believe Mr Herath was also seeking material support for Sri Lanka's military campaign against the LTTE.

At the meeting, India supplied Sri Lanka with a list of home villages of Sri Lankan refugees and Colombo will set up reception centres in designated areas. No time frame has been set for the return but several sites on Mannar Island near Pesalai have been earmarked.

Since an Indian ultimatum that Sri Lankan refugees outside camps must register with the Tamil Nadu government or face deportation, only 25,000 have complied. Another 75,000 face immediate deportation says Home Minister S B Chavan and over 2,000 have been arrested, 200 of them said to be LTTE militants. There are a further 100,000 Sri Lankan refugees in 350 camps in the state where screening is now underway.

Repatriates - Sri Lankan Tamils of Indian origin who returned to Tamil Nadu after successive agreements between the two governments were exempted from registration after a Madras High Court decision in late July. Talks are underway with the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha to release anti-LTTE militants including TELO military leader Selvam and 300 cadres, to fight for the Sri Lankan Army against the Tigers.

GANDHI ASSASSINATION: THE PLOT THICKENS

INDIA is to set up a second Commission of Enquiry into the Rajiv Gandhi assassination after growing rumours of a cover-up and the death of a leading suspect in police custody.

Home Minister S B Chavan told Parliament on 25 July that other agencies internal and external were involved in the assassination with the Tamil Tigers - the chief suspects. Observers say the 40-strong Special Investigation Team (SIT) from the Central Bureau of Investigation lacks the authority or the political will to make the necessary connections.

There is controversy over the death of Shanmugam a smuggler with LTTE links who was arrested by SIT in Vedaraniyam and found hanged a hundred yards away, in front of a Congress party leader's house.

There are rumours of a feud between SIT and the Tamil Nadu police. In early July, when SIT came close to capturing Sivarasan known as One-eyed Jack - the alleged LTTE mastermind behind the assassination - his hideout was only three houses away from Kodangaiyur police station. The investigation currently demonstrates SIT's frustrating lack of success. Close to 20 people are now under arrest many of them for harbouring alleged suspects but others have defied capture by taking cyanide capsules - a LTTE trademark.

LTTE munitions expert Dixon died after taking cyanide when a house in Coimbatore was surrounded by police in late July. Another suspect Guna killed himself with a grenade. A few days later, two other suspects died after taking cyanide when they were trapped in a house in Bangalore. Reports say LTTE Central Committee member Kasi Ananthan who met Rajiv Gandhi a few weeks before his death, is in custody and helping police with their enquiries.

* A prominent Sri Lankan journalist exiled in Madras, Mr S Sivanayagam was arrested by Tamil Nadu police on 19 July for illegally entering India. Mr Sivanayagam edits the English fortnightly "Tamil Nation" which is a prominent supporter of the Tamil Tigers.

MASSACRE ENQUIRY OPENS IN THE EAST

MRS PALIPODY ARASAMMAH told the Presidential Commission investigating the Kokkaddicholai massacre at its opening session on 29 July in Batticaloa how her husband Santhosam and 16 others were shot dead and their bodies burned in a landmine crater. Sri Lankan infantry ran amok at Kokkaddicholai on 11 June, killing 159 civilians and wounding 27 after a LTTE landmine killed two soldiers. Reports say 21 women were raped - the youngest was 12 years old. After four days the Commission suspended hearings and will reconvene in Colombo. No time frame has been set for its report.

Conditions in the East have again deteriorated with widespread drought throughout Batticaloa and Amparai Districts. NGOs say the poor in many parts of Amparai have received no food stamps for over a year. Roundups by Special Task Force (STF) police commandos and landmine attacks by the Tigers continue throughout Amparai. Two STF were killed and 9 wounded in a LTTE ambush near Thirukkivil on 29 July.

North of Batticaloa town LTTE activity has increased, punctuated by Army reprisals. Tamil group EPRLF say soldiers shot dead 14 youths at Kinnaiyady near Valaichenai on 10 July. The Tigers continue to infiltrate Polonnaruwa District and LTTE units killed 15 Muslims at Puthur and 9 Sinhalese at Karapola on 6 July. Road and rail links continue to come under attack despite the strengthening of the Army camp near Punanai on the Polonnaruwa road. Seven soldiers and a TELO scout died in a landmine blast at Chenkalady on 27 July, guarding the Colombo-Batticaloa rail link, re-established only 24 hours earlier. Five Muslims including four children died in a fire at a refugee camp in Kalmunai on 22 July. Sir Abdul Ameer of the Muslim Refugee Rehabilitation Organisation says there are now over 100,000 Muslim refugees in Sri Lanka after LTTE attacks in the East and a Tiger ultimatum last September expelling them from the North.

IN BRIEF

* A millionaire Sinhalese businessman from Anuradhapura and seven military policemen have been charged with smuggling contraband to the Tigers in the North. A consignment of banned goods worth Rs 5 million (\$123,000) was discovered at Ranasevapura. Over 40 items including batteries, petrol and matches are currently banned as part of the Army's economic blockade of the North. The Thandikulam checkpoint reopened in late July with hundreds of civilians a day moving north but very few coming south. There is still LTTE activity south of Vavuniya. Four soldiers died and eight were injured in an attack at Arugampulveli on 22 July.

* Army activity has dramatically increased on Mannar Island with mini-camps established every mile of the 20-mile stretch from Mannar town to Talaimannar pier where returning refugees from south India would land, sources say. In a clash with the LTTE at Vellankulam, seven miles from Mannar, eight soldiers and 31 Tigers were killed in mid-July.

* An abandoned jungle base belonging to the Sinhalese Marxist insurgent People's Liberation Front (JVP) was discovered in Hambantota District after six JVP suspects were arrested in Tissamaharama in late July. Over 14,000 JVP suspects are currently detained by Sri Lankan security forces.

* Health authorities in Colombo say Cholera is spreading throughout the District with 63 confirmed and 240 suspected cases in the last six weeks. Some 24 people have died from Dengue fever this year and there are another 500 suspected cases.

CRACKDOWN ON TAMILS IN THE SOUTH

VARATHAN, the alleged mastermind of an LTTE bomb-squad who destroyed military headquarters (JOC) in Colombo, took cyanide when cornered by police at Talawakelle Estate on 3 July. Large-scale roundups have continued in the Hill Country and Colombo in the wake of the JOC blast.

Three leaders of the Hill Country People's Front including its President, former PLOTE member Chandrasekaran have been arrested and taken to Colombo. An accomplice of Varathan named as Ramanesan is still on the run. Police combed 27 estates in Matale in mid-July and local people say men in Army uniforms looted 70 houses on Kelabokke Estate. TULF MP Mavai Senathirajah says 97 Muslim refugees from the North were arbitrarily arrested in Kandy including an 80 year-old woman who died in police custody on the way to Redigama Army camp.

In Colombo, over 300 people have been arrested including 11 hard-core LTTE. They are said to include Akkaraipatru leader Ilango and Valaichenai female commander Sathiyashyama, employed as a domestic servant in Battaramulle. Another female leader was arrested in the Sea Street area. The capital remains tense with streets cordoned off and spot-checks on traffic entering the city.

Over 10,000 Tamil refugees in makeshift camps and temples are now being screened. There are said to be 100,000 Tamil refugees from the North in the city staying in cheap lodgings or with relatives and the authorities say all temporary residents must be registered by householders or they will be prosecuted.

Police launched a new crackdown in the Negambo area led by TELO cadres in a bid to shut down LTTE smuggling networks on the west coast. All refugees living outside camps in the Western Province have been asked to register with the police within 14 days.

BRITAIN TO DEPORT TIGER LEADER

BRITAIN has issued a deportation order against Sathasivam Krishnakumar alias Kittu, head of the Tiger's International Wing in London, accusing him of attempting to buy arms and of raising funds from the Tamil community by "threats and coercion".

Kittu, 31, a former Jaffna military commander and Central Committee member of the LTTE came to London in October 1989 for medical treatment after losing a leg in a bomb blast in 1987. On 28 July British immigration officials wrote to Kittu refusing his claim for political asylum and ordering his deportation in support of "the international fight against terrorism". He has seven days to leave the country.

Under the 1971 Immigration Act, Kittu has no right of judicial appeal but can make representations to a special panel of advisors appointed by the Home Secretary. This may take up to a year and Kittu is likely to be held in prison while representations are underway. Sources close to the Tigers say Kittu's life is in danger if he is returned to Colombo and that pressure for his deportation comes from India which accuses the LTTE of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination.

British Home Secretary Kenneth Baker announced tough new measures in early July to stem the flow of asylum-seekers. Britain expects up to 50,000 asylum applications this year of which 5,000 will be from Sri Lankan Tamils.

Germany and France also say they will tighten asylum laws. Three Sri Lankan Tamil women who claimed asylum at Roissy airport near Paris on 27 June, were forcibly deported to Colombo on 13 July. Sources say they were arrested on arrival and there are rumours that one has committed suicide. Over 25,000 Sri Lankan Tamils claimed asylum in Europe last year. Another 30 Tamil asylum-seekers were dumped on the Turkish coast on 8 July by an Indian ship after the crew robbed them.