

Tigers pounce on Pooneryn

OVER 1,000 Sri Lankan soldiers are dead or missing after the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) overran a key military complex at Pooneryn on the south-west shore of Jaffna lagoon on 11 November, in the guerrillas' greatest success of the ten-year civil war.

In a daring night attack, Tiger frogmen captured Nagathevanthurai Navy base while two units of the LTTE's crack *Charles Anthony Brigade* attacked Pooneryn Army camp a few miles away from the south, with mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. After 12 hours of fighting, hundreds of soldiers fled the base into the jungles as the Tigers looted the armoury, capturing Rs 300 million (\$7 million) worth of arms and equipment. The haul included two military gunboats, two tanks and five 120mm artillery pieces with a five-mile range. Vital radar and communications equipment at Nagathevanthurai was destroyed and three 30-foot Navy patrol boats sunk in the battle.

Another 500 soldiers remained pinned down on the Army camp's perimeter before Sri Lankan air and sea reinforcements landed at Kalmunai Point after three days of fighting and the LTTE withdrew. Sri Lankan forces fought off a Tiger attack on their military foothold inside the peninsula at Palaly airbase designed to stall the rescue attempt.

The Colombo press estimates 700 military personnel killed and over 400 wounded out of 2,292 soldiers and 268 sailors at the two bases. Military sources say only 194 bodies were recovered. Hundreds more are missing. The government has given the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) a list of 750 missing soldiers believed dead or captured to clarify their fate with the LTTE. An Amnesty International state-

1,000 soldiers dead or missing after LTTE attack

ment suggests the Tigers hold around 70 prisoners after the battle. Around 35 civilians died in retaliatory air attacks inside the Jaffna peninsula including 19 killed when St James' Church, Gurunagar, its three domes clearly visible from the air, was destroyed on 13 November.

The LTTE says 411 cadre died in *Operation Thalavai* (frog), the assault on Pooneryn. Its purpose say the guerrillas was to counter the government's increasingly military posture and to halt Navy attacks on the strategic ferry crossing at Kilali, the Tigers last supply line to Jaffna. Over 200 civilians have died escaping Jaffna in Navy attacks this year. Two days before the Pooneryn attack, the military had announced a new air-sea operation to destroy boats crossing the Jaffna lagoon.

Colombo was tense as the ashes of 187 soldiers retrieved from the Tigers by the ICRC flew south from Vavuniya on 19 November. The LTTE had already sealed off the north, forbidding civilian movements in anticipation of a military counter-attack. A sea of white mourning flags covered Kandy and other southern towns as President DB Wijetunge appealed for calm after opposition SLFP leader Mrs S Bandaranaike called for the country to be put on a war footing. Hundreds of anxious relatives kept vigil outside Army headquarters in Colombo seeking news of missing soldiers.

The press described the Pooneryn attack as a "national disaster". Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe told Parliament on 24 November that a four-man Army enquiry would report on why early warning of a LTTE buildup around Pooneryn was not heeded. The military's

reputation is badly-bruised in the aftermath. While the generals are preoccupied with in-fighting and profiteering, the poor farmer's son on the front line is under-equipped and ill-

trained with morale sliding dangerously. Kickbacks to key officials allow crony contractors to dump rotting rations on front-line troops. Nearly 300 soldiers at Pooneryn were raw recruits all of whom are dead or missing. Eye-witnesses say some shot themselves rather than fall into the hands of the Tigers. Soldiers issued with only 120 bullets each stood little chance under concentrated attack.

In a thundering speech, Deputy Parliamentary speaker Gamini Fonseka denounced Colombo's complacent political culture of carnivals and beauty queens while its demoralised Army did not have a change of clothes. Old soldiers and armchair generals say the military lacks a cohesive strategy and fails to exploit its air and sea strengths in more effective combined operations. Both failings were graphically illustrated in the Army's confused *Yal Devi* October offensive on Kilali - where the seaborne attack on Pooneryn came from.

There are persistent rumours that Army chief Lt.Gen. Cecil Waidyaratne will retire early at the end of the year to be replaced by Maj. Gen. Gerry de Silva appointed northern commander by President Wijetunge in late November.

For the Tigers, *Operation Thalavai* shows they have learned important tactical lessons since their abortive siege of Elephant Pass two years ago and also may forestall a major spring offensive on Jaffna by the military next year. LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in his speech, celebrating *Mahaveerar Varam* or Great Heroes Week, the Tigers annual commemoration of its 6,000 martyred cadre in late November, said Pooneryn showed the futility of pursuing a military solution.

The LTTE was keeping the door open for negotiations but the government had rejected its offers said Mr Prabhakaran, maintaining that it was Sinhala chauvinism that created Tamil separatism. If the new stirrings of unease in Colombo are indicative, only the gun, is likely to drive the government to the negotiating table.

Over 40 civilian prisoners, held in a single cell by the military at Pooneryn since the Army's Operation Valampuri captured the islands west of Jaffna in October 1991, were set free during the Tiger offensive. Three died from lack of medical care during their 25-month ordeal and another two sick and elderly died from shock during the three-day battle. All of the prisoners were non-combatants, old men, young women and children.

THE NORTH

Revenge

NINE civilians praying inside Gurunagar St James' church in Jaffna were killed on 13 November when a Sri Lankan Airforce plane scored a direct hit in retaliatory bombing attacks following the LTTE attack on the Pooneryn Army camp. The 132 year-old church was razed to the ground and 53 other civilians were injured, ten of whom died later.

In a passionate letter to President Wijetunge, Jaffna's Catholic Bishop Dr Thomas Savundaranayagam said the church had been intentionally targeted as there is no LTTE camp nearby. He described the bombing as "a dastardly act" by the Airforce and says the government must accept full responsibility.

Aerial bombing of the north continues despite desperate appeals by Tamil MPs. Army sources say the bombing is to prevent military operations by the Tigers in view of LTTE leader V Prabhakaran's birthday on 26 November. A senior Army officer claims that the best strategy for the military which is now confined to camps is to bomb enemy targets. It is clear that in many instances civilian targets have been deliberately chosen.

The Airforce bombed Kilinochchi hospital on 15 November killing two mothers and a child. The maternity ward was extensively damaged and many pregnant women and new-born babies sustained injuries. Further south in Mullaitivu, houses were damaged by shells fired from the Kent and Dollar Army camps on the nearby villages in mid-November. At Semmalai, school

teacher Subramaniam Krishnan was injured by a shell.

The day after the Pooneryn attack, Jaffna Government Agent (GA) K Manickavasagar was among 25 people injured when a bomb fell on the Secretariat, the seat of government authority. Mr Manickavasagar told Defence Secretary Hamilton Wanasinghe later in the month that a military solution to the ethnic conflict would not succeed and denied statements attributed to him in the Colombo newspaper *The Island* that there were sufficient food stocks in Jaffna. The GA has called on the government to end the economic blockade and restore electricity to the peninsula.

Jaffna was bombed even after Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe assured Mr Manickavasagar that action would be taken to end indiscriminate attacks. In late November, 25 people were injured in Manipai, Kondavil and Point Pedro. Damage to buildings in Chavakachcheri was estimated at Rs 5 million.

Jaffna town was bombed again on 5 December, while people were shopping in the streets, killing 26 civilians, including children, and injuring 71 others.

Shortage of drugs in the Jaffna District hospitals has made treatment of sick and the injured impossible. Torrential rains in the north have compounded the problems, washing out temporary refugee camps and creating new health risks and food shortages. For the Jaffna resident, anything from the sky now signals disaster.

Poorly targeted

The government think tank, the Institute of Policy Studies' 1993 report on the economy says the state's *Janasaviya* poverty alleviation programme is expensive, poorly targeted and provides distorted incentives to work. The World Bank has provided a \$100 million budget for *Janasaviya* in the next three years.

Flood deaths

Over 50 people have died in floods in central Tamil Nadu, south India in mid-November with 7,000 houses destroyed and 30,000 displaced. Government officials say damage to roads, buildings and rural infrastructure tops \$100 million.

Sentence

VW Mariyadas convicted of conspiracy to murder TULF leader A Amirthalingam was sentenced to seven years in prison by Colombo High Court judge TB Weerasuriya on 19 November. The court refused to take into consideration four years Mariadas had already spent in custody. Sources say he will appeal.

Verdict

After five months of preliminary hearings, Madras judge SM Siddiq gave the go-ahead for the Rajiv Gandhi murder case to open, by rejecting a dismissal petition from all 26 accused of involvement in the former Indian Prime Minister's assassination.

Stand-off at Madhu

OVER 30,000 Tamils at Madhu church in LTTE-controlled Mannar District have appealed to United Nations refugee agency UNHCR to resume operations after the UN withdrew from Sri Lanka's largest refugee camp in late October saying its staff were in danger from Tiger-organised demonstrations.

The crisis erupted after the government cut food aid to 6,000 refugees at Madhu, Sri Lanka's most sacred Catholic shrine, to force them back to Army-controlled villages further south. UNHCR, responsible for escorting government food convoys was powerless to intervene, maintain Geneva officials.

Following the UN withdrawal, the government suspended all convoys after the Tigers looted 20 lorry-loads of

kerosene destined for Madhu in early November. Church workers say the camp has only two weeks' food supply left out of a two-month reserve stock.

There is growing pressure on the government to restore the convoy lifeline. UNHCR says it is willing to resume operations if it gets security guarantees from the Tigers. Dr Rayappu Joseph Bishop of Mannar visited Madhu in late November to mediate with LTTE commander *Kathir* but there was no immediate breakthrough.

There is speculation that government pressure may have hastened the UN withdrawal. Madhu poses particular problems for the military. With 30,000 refugees, UN officials and a religious shrine set in deep jungles surrounded by

LTTE base camps, the Army cannot launch a full-frontal assault. First the refugees and those helping them must be forced out into "cleared areas".

Mannar's rich rice lands fed by Giants Tank means there is still a lifeline of local food grains for Madhu but after the worst rains in the district for ten years, there is an urgent need for milk powder, emergency shelter materials and medicines as the risk of infant malnutrition and infection rises. UNHCR operations on Army-controlled Mannar Island continue to provide food and shelter to 1,600 refugees at Pesalai camp. There are plans to repatriate over 3,000 Mannar refugees from south India through Talaimannar when the north-east monsoon abates in January.

■ Army impatient over resettlement strategy

Eastern elections on hold

AFTER pressure from Tamil and Muslim parties, President Wijetunge is expected to postpone local government elections in the east, scheduled for January, for a further six months. The elections are widely seen as a prelude to a referendum on demerging the North-East Province which most Tamil and Muslim groups oppose.

The government's overall strategy is to force a semblance of normalisation in the east, consolidated by economic development, to allow the military an all-out push on the north. But the uncomfortable truth is while the Army keeps uneasy control of the eastern coastal strip, the Tigers remain firmly entrenched in the interior. With hundreds of LTTE cadre despatched to Jaffna to

defend the peninsula, the Tigers are sitting tight in the east, building up their increasingly pervasive taxation system as more money is promised for resettlement. But of Rs 15 million (\$330,000) allocated for reconstruction in Batticaloa this year only Rs 2.5 million have been spent. Over 100,000 of the district's 240,000 population are said to qualify for assistance.

Eastern Army commander Maj. Gen. Lucky Algama blasted Batticaloa government officials for not releasing funds for housing and farming grants to speed up the resettlement process. At least \$12 million is needed to rebuild 40,000 houses in the district. Almost 10,000 refugees remain in camps while over 70,000 are displaced with relatives and friends. The

military plans new identity cards for the district to curtail the LTTE threat and cultivation now requires military permission. Tension remains high. Two Tamils abducted by unidentified youth from a temple festival were found dead in a nearby Palmyra grove at Kiran in mid-November.

The Army wants to clear refugee camps to create the illusion of progress. Over 500 refugees from flashpoint villages on the Polonnaruwa border in Pethalai camp near Valaichenai are under increasing pressure. Hundreds of Tamils from Pethalai and surrounding hamlets were assembled in Valaichenai at 4am in mid-November and screened by *talaiyati* or masked informers. Ten men and two women were detained.

LTTE hit-and-run raids in the interior continue. Three Sinhalese farmers were killed and five injured by guerrillas on 14 November in the Welikande area close to the Tigers' Thoppigala jungle stronghold. Areas north of the Polonnaruwa road remain contested despite nominal Army control. One soldier died and five were injured in a clash with the Tigers at Verugal a week later.

Further north in Trincomalee District, eight LTTE were killed by soldiers at Kattaiparichchan on 21 November. Seven soldiers returning from night patrol died in a LTTE ambush in the volatile Eechilampathai area on 2 December. Two Sri Lankan Airforce personnel died in a landmine blast between Morawewa and Pankulam in western Trincomalee on 21 November.

Gambling on going home

DR FRANCIS DENG, the Representative on Internally Displaced Persons of the United Nations Secretary General, made a flying visit to Sri Lanka in mid-November to assess the refugee crisis at first hand. After field visits to the east and talks with government officials and NGOs, Dr Deng called for more international aid to strengthen the resettlement process. But for some refugees there are limited prospects to return home while the fighting continues said the UN official.

In unsettled Trincomalee, resettlement remains a gamble. The government strapped for cash, want the refugees to resettle first and apply for assistance grants later. The military, increasingly impatient to clear refugee camps by the end of the year, are putting pressure on local NGOs to provide temporary housing for returnees or cease operating in designated areas. Few of those resettled have received start-up grants or housing allowances promised by the authorities.

An opposition party delegation visiting Clappenberg, Thambalakamam and Muthur in late November said many refugees after three years in camps want to return home but will not do so without adequate financial help and proper security.

Most of their farms are derelict and overgrown and their enthusiasm is sapped by recent heavy rains.

Hundreds of Tamil refugees in Karaitivu, Amparai District pleaded with Dr Deng for protection and financial assistance to return home to remote villages in the interior. Among them were 45 widows, their husbands killed by Sinhalese gangs or Army units when the June 1990 violence flared.

NGOs say government resettlement policy must be flexible, sensitive to security concerns and properly funded. Most of the responsible government officials have never visited refugee camps or returnees' home areas and NGOs are left to fill the breach. The Army's current resettlement deadline will not improve the process especially since the government is unwilling or unable to pay for it.

Clay horses

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) has set an end-of-the-year ultimatum for the government to solve Plantation workers' problems including ownership of land and a minimum of 300 days work in a year to estate workers. CWC, a trade union, a political party and a government ally, supported the privatisation of plantations in 1992 but now opposes it, because of deteriorating working conditions and government plans to extend management company leases to 30 years.

When CWC leader and Tourism Minister S Thondaman met President Wijetunge on 22 November CWC insiders say President Wijetunge bluntly refused to consider granting lands to estate workers 98% of whom do not own land. In the backdrop of a virulent media campaign against Mr Thondaman, the

CWC held talks with SLFP's Sirimavo Bandaranaike and DUNF's Gamini Dissanayake to explore possible alliances. The CWC may support a DUNF no-confidence motion against the Chief Minister of the UNP-controlled Central Provincial Council. Some CWC officers fear that a split with the UNP would undo the union's achievements and say a political alliance with SLFP or DUNF would be like, as the saying goes, "getting into the water on a clay horse". Over 200,000 new voters have been registered following legislation introduced by the Premadasa government granting citizenship rights to the plantation workers. Observers believe UNP will not be able to hold the Hill Country in next year's election without the support of the powerful CWC.

Abductions and disappearances in a capital under siege

Colombo holds its breath

RUMOURS that the Army's Third *Gajaba* regiment planned to "celebrate" LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran's birthday by burning down the major Tamil suburb of Wellawatte, left Sri Lanka's capital Colombo tense and virtually deserted on 26 November.

Shops, offices and schools were shut as the city held its breath. Police and Army units in a massive security operation watched over empty streets and two major bomb scares in the city centre. The authorities' version was that the LTTE planned major operations in the city to mark their leader's birthday and Great Heroes Week - their annual salute to martyred Tiger cadre.

The crisis passed without disaster but Colombo remains a city under siege. The polarisation after Pooneryn is such that both threats are equally plausible. The *Gajaba* scare also has all the hallmarks of LTTE "psy-ops" - the guerrillas' new tactical offensive on Colombo. Almost every week the press announces a new LTTE threat to the city from Tiger sui-

cide squads hidden among 100,000 Tamil refugees in the capital who have fled the North-East. Regular security sweeps of hundreds of rundown hotels and cheap lodging houses in Tamil parts of the city continue with refugees without identity papers at particular risk.

A new hunt for two LTTE women LTTE suicide bombers was launched in early November while an armed Tamil youth was arrested outside Army headquarters. After the "Prabhakaran birthday party" rumour took hold, 500 Tamils were arrested in a four-day period in mid-November. Police say among those arrested in Kelaniya were 30 Tiger cadre from the east. Nine LTTE suspects with explosives were arrested in Nugegoda.

Abductions and disappearances continue. Tamil MP Suresh Premachandran says ten Tamil youth have disappeared recently in the Wellawatte area. Mr Premachandran's bodyguard S Meganathan, was abducted at gunpoint in Colombo by a rogue unit of Batticaloa police in mid-November. He is now in

Batticaloa hospital with extensive injuries. Amnesty International have issued an urgent appeal for RPK Sebaganam 20, arrested by two men in uniform and 13 in plain clothes from his grandparents' house in Colombo on 20 October. His family tried to lodge a complaint with the police but were turned away.

Haran Kumaravel from Jaffna was abducted on Armour Street on 14 November, his dead body found on Ratmalana railway line three weeks later. His killing is said to be the handiwork of former PLOTE cadre Uma Prakash who leads one of several death squads from the Directorate of Military Intelligence unit in Ragama with a brief to clear the capital of the terrorist threat. Amnesty International condemned the new spate of disappearances in October and has called for adequate safeguards for those arrested. The cycle of rumours and roundups seems destined to continue. Colombo is now under psychological siege as well as military attack.

The President's dentist

THE political fall-out from the Pooneryn attack has left the ruling United National Party (UNP) uncertain of its next move. In the vacuum, there are rumours of a new initiative for federalism spearheaded by Colombo Tamil intellectuals but the more vociferous strain of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism, *Jathika Chintanaya* or "national thinking" is also gaining ground. Its chief theoretician Mr Gunadasa Amerasekara is President Wijetunge's dentist and a close confidante.

The government's widely discredited Parliamentary Select Committee set up two years ago to solve the ethnic crisis tabled its final six-page report in Parliament on 12 November. Little is expected of it. State Finance Minister Harold Herath presenting the Annual Budget two days earlier, promised 5.6% economic growth next year but with the agricultural and plantation sectors in crisis and the war costing \$1 million a day, there is little room for optimism.

The talk now is of national thinking and putting the country on a war footing - cutting through the swathe of sinecures, paralysis and profiteering. Sri

Lanka has 75 government ministers but no State Defence Minister or national strategy to win the war say critics. President Wijetunge currently holds both Defence and Finance portfolios.

The shock waves of Pooneryn will be quickly anaesthetized in the round of

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas.

If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact

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New Year parties and dances said Colombo's *Island* in a blistering editorial calling for national military service. Why the war effort is so quickly forgotten is that its tragedies touch few of the middle classes. It is the poor farmers's son who dies on the front while the children of the elite grace Western universities and the boardrooms of family businesses.

Other families cannot forget. OPFMD an organisation of parents of 35,000 youth who died or disappeared in the Army's brutal suppression of the southern Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) uprising between 1987 and 1990 has called for an independent commission to investigate their children's fate. An OPFMD exhibition in Colombo in mid-November included a list of 4,500 names of the missing and photos of burned and bleeding bodies. The government refuses to grant death certificates or pay compensation to OPFMD families or to prosecute the perpetrators where there is hard evidence as in the case of 46 Embilipitiya schoolboys disappeared in 1989 by the local military.