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Troops marching on to LTTE's last terrain

TIGERS FIGHT BACK IN DESPERATION

DEPLOY 2000 CIVILIANS IN FRONT LINE

by Ranil WIJAYAPALA

The week long battle in Puthukudiyiruppu, the last township under the control of the LTTE, has given strong indications that Tiger outfit cannot bear the pressure exerted on them by the Security Forces although their last batch of cadres are engaged in a do or die battle to avoid their last hideouts falling to the hands of the Security Forces.



The elite commandos of the Tiger outfit, from the Radha regiment are now in action in the battlefield. What they are trying is to breach the Security Forces defences and come out of the small terrain they are now holding in the Puthukudiyiruppu East and Iranapalai area to get rid of the huge pressure, they face.

It is also now clear that the LTTE had kept their well trained cadres as a reserve to deploy them in the battlefield at a critical stage like this.

The elite commando type cadres from the Radha Regiment who were providing personal security for Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran are now making a desperate attempt to protect their leader from being killed or captured by the troops marching towards their most sensitive high security zones in Iranapalai.

Enclave

Whatever the reasons behind their action, the objective of the LTTE is now very clear, they want to come out of this enclave and take refuge in the thick jungle patches or mingle with the civilians to survive.

The effort made by the LTTE cadres on the wee hours of Thursday in Chalai South was a clear indication that they were trying their best to escape from this small terrain in Puthukudiyiruppu and engage in terror acts targeting Security Forces and the civilians who had survived for a long period in hiding.

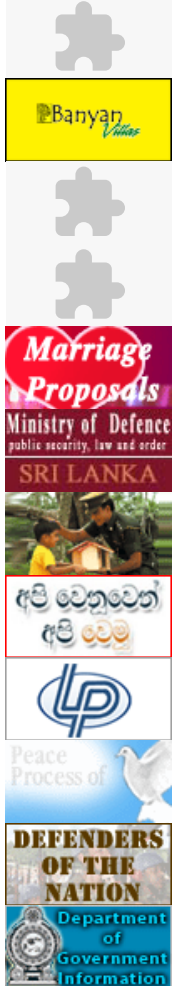
But their efforts to create a calamity and break the defences of the Security Forces ended in a fiasco in face of the valor and determination of the infantry troops and the Commando troops attached to 58 Division under the command of Brigadier Shavendra Silva who retaliated to this counter attack fearlessly.

It was in the wee hours of Thursday the 58 Division and 55 Division observed a civilian movement from the Puthumattalan area in the Safe Zone towards Chalai. Initially there was around 500 civilians seen moving to the area and suddenly they disappeared.

With this movement there was huge attack on the defence line linking the 58 Division and the 55 Division South of Chalai. The area is separated from a lagoon and it was difficult to operate in this stretch, specially in the night.

The 11 Artillery Regiment attach to the 58 Division and 8 Vijayaba Infantry Regiment attached to the 55 Division were manning this defence in the edges of the lagoon stretch and reacted to the situation swiftly.

But they were overpowered by the sheer numbers of cadres, with huge fire power who started to breach the defence line in waves around 3.30 a.m. By this time the operations



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room of the 58 Division and the 55 Division had made arrangements to send reinforcements to the area.

The Commanding Officer of the 2 Commando Regiment Lt. Colonel Jayantha Balasuriya was immediately informed about the situation and he was instructed to send commando troops to the scene immediately.

Four teams from the Echo Group were immediately taken to Chalai South area in support of the infantry troops. By this time the Tiger cadres have taken control of few bunkers in the defence line and they had started firing at the Commando troops advancing towards them. The Tiger cadres had reached the eastern side of the lagoon and started firing at the troops advancing towards them. During this ensuing battle officer Nadeera Vidhanapathirana was injured and Lt. Sanjeewa had to take over the command of the commando groups thereafter.

A fierce battle erupted in this narrow stretch of lagoon till mid noon Thursday to flush out the last Tiger cadres from the scene.

It was the fiercest battle fought by the Commando troops, and Commanding Officer of the 2 Commando Regiment Lt. Colonel Jayantha Balasuriya commanded the teams from the Echo group effectively to take upper hand in the battle.

It was a battle between the elite commandos of the Army and the LTTE and the commandos of the Sri Lanka Army proved their mettle at the end of the day killing more than 65 Tiger cadres and recovering their personal weapons and other heavy weapons taken with them to push back the Security Forces defences.

Ration packets

During the search operation 33 Tiger bodies have been recovered from the area and several bodies were found floating in the lagoon stretch.

Commando troops alone had collected 55 T-56 personal weapons belonging to the dead cadres, two T-81-2 guns, MPMG, four LMG and three 60 mm mortars.

Meanwhile, troops of 55 Division have found 3 bodies of LTTE cadres killed during the same confrontation on Thursday. 5 x T-56 weapons, 2x T-81 assault rifles, 01x 60mm mortar bomb, 3 x I-Com sets, and ration packets were also uncovered during the search operation.

According to military officials this is the first time the Security Forces recovered such a large number of weapons belonging to the Tiger cadres after effectively foiling one of their massive counter attacks.

But it was not the end of their effort. The LTTE launched another counter attack on Friday morning from the Puthumattalan North area towards the 58 Division and Sea Tiger leader Soosai personally commanded that counter attack around 3.30 a.m.



The LTTE is continuing these counter attacks as they had lost control of the road that links the No fire zone and the mainland across the lagoon with 58 Division troops capturing this road stretch on Thursday.

The counter attack by the LTTE on Friday morning was also foiled effectively by the 58 Division troops compelling the Tiger cadres to abandon their mission.

The 58 Division troops also foiled yet another attempt by the LTTE send an explosive laden vehicle to the forward defence line of the 58 Division in the wee hours of yesterday.

But troops hit the vehicle before it reached the forward defences and the vehicle exploded into a huge fire ball around 4.30 a.m. yesterday.

Amidst this explosion Tiger cadres tried to infiltrate the Security Forces defence lines but it was effectively foiled by the 58 Division troops pushing the Tiger cadres back to their terrain.

Therefore, within the past 72 hours the 58 Division had foiled three major counter attacks by the LTTE killing over 100 Tiger cadres and wounding scores among their elite cadres.

These counter attacks by the LTTE were launched after the 58 Division troops captured the strategic Puthukudiyiruppu junction on Tuesday morning after a 48 hour battle with the LTTE who were strongly defending this junction for months.

The 58 Division troops commanded by Brigadier Shavendra Silva managed to capture the Puthukudiyiruppu junction on Tuesday around 6.45 a.m.

The Task Force VIII troops led by Colonel G.V. Ravipriya also moved into the Puthukudiyiruppu junction after 58 Div troops moved there on Tuesday morning.

The Task Force VIII troops are under the command of 53 Division GOC Kamal Gunaratne who was promoted to the rank of Major General along with 59 GOC Nandana Udawatta.

Scores of Tiger cadres were killed during the fierce battles that raged surrounding the Puthukudiyiruppu junction as 58 Division changed its West to East march and directed troops towards this key junction on Sunday morning.

It was after 48 hours fighting the Infantrymen of the 9 Gemunu Watch under the command of Lt. Colonel Lal Chandrasiri and 12 Gajabha Regiment under the command of Major Saliya Amunugama played the key role in capturing Puthukudiyiruppu junction under the command of 582 Brigade Commander Lt. Colonel Sanjay Wanigasinghe.

The 1Gajaba Regiment and 4 Vijayaba Infantry Regiment attached to the Task Force VIII also joined hands with the 58 Division troops in securing the entire Puthukudiyiruppu junction having entered the Puthukudiyiruppu junction from the South of A-35 road.

The main concern of the 58 Division is now focused on the Iranapalai located North East of Puthukudiyiruppu city centre where the LTTE has located their main operation rooms of their top level leaders. As of yesterday the 58 Division has completely captured Puthukudiyiruppu North area and deployed its troops some 400 metres distance from the Safe Zone and running parallel to the No Fire Zone from the mainland.

Therefore the main concern of the 58 Division is to capture the remaining areas in Puthukudiyiruppu advancing from West to East direction.

As 58 Division troops are marching towards Iranapalai area amidst securing the remaining parts of the Puthukudiyiruppu town, the 55 Division under the command of Brigadier Prasanna Silva is also advancing towards the edge of the No Fire Zone in Puthumattalan from the Northern direction.

The Task Force VIII and the 53 Division are heading towards the centre of Puthukudiyiruppu from South to North direction and covered the entire Nanthikadal lagoon from the Western direction.

Precision

With these moves the LTTE has been confined now to less than 40 square kilo metres stretch in Puthukudiyiruppu including the safe zone declared by the Government.

Therefore Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka during his visit to Vanni Security Forces headquarters to assess the ground situation in the Vanni liberation operation on Wednesday has told the field commanders that all possible safety measures should be taken with utmost precision when conducting offensive operations in the remaining area under LTTE control.

According to the Army Commander the LTTE has been left with only 45 square kilometres including the safety zone declared for civilians trapped inside Tiger controlled areas.

The number of civilians trapped inside this narrow land stretch is around 76,000 according to estimates by Government officials.

Therefore, it has become a prerequisite on the part of the Security Forces, as said by the Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka, to take maximum safety measures to ensure safety of the civilians in this narrow stretch of land.

Amid this background, the final battle against the LTTE is going to be tricky for the Security Forces as they are responsible for each and every civilian's life entrapped there irrespective of the fact that they are fighting against the most ruthless terror outfit in the world.

The LTTE has demonstrated its inhumanity against those innocent Tamil civilians from their own community though the Security Forces welcome them humanely.

The Sri Lankan Security Forces, unlike other nations which carried out indiscriminate bombing against their enemy, from the beginning have displayed its capability to react to such sensitive situations maintaining a minimum civilian casualty rate and trying their best to maintain a zero casualty rate.

On the other hand, Sri Lankan Security Forces cannot act irresponsibly as they are engaged in a humanitarian operation to liberate the innocent Tamil civilian population who are also a part of the Sri Lankan nation, from the clutches of a terror outfit.

Therefore, the final battle which is now on in Puthukuduyiruppu in the true spirit has turned into a humanitarian operation and each and every step in this battle has become crucial because of the possibilities of the LTTE using these innocent civilians as cannon fodder. Intelligence reports already has confirmed that the LTTE has conscripted nearly 2,000 civilians between the age of 14 to 45 to the front line after hurriedly arranged weapon training for them.

This might be an attempt by the LTTE to tarnish the image of the Security Forces who had maintained very good record of protecting the civilian lives during the war, at the last moment where LTTE is going to face its certain defeat.

It was amid this situation UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon Friday (March 6) called on the LTTE to remove its weapons and fighters from areas of civilian concentration to cooperate in all humanitarian efforts calculated to relieve the suffering of civilians and to immediately cease recruitment of children.

Hostilities

In his statement the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said he was extremely concerned over the deteriorating situation for civilians trapped in Northern Sri Lanka. He strongly deplored the mounting death toll of civilians in the area of fighting.



"There is an urgent need to bring this conflict to a speedy end without further loss of civilian life.

In this respect, the Secretary-General renewed his call to the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to suspend hostilities for the purposes of allowing civilians to leave the conflict zone and allowing immediate humanitarian access to them.

Therefore, the decision is still in the hands of the LTTE whether they are going to allow those civilians to move out of that boiling pot or to wait till the Security Forces move into that area to liberate them. The coming days will prove as to who would succeed.