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HISTORIC HOSTAGE RESCUE OPERATION :

Sri Lanka Army writes glorious chapter



If there was any fateful day in the Sri Lankan military history that would decide the destiny of the Sri Lankan nation, the Sri Lanka Security Forces and all the citizen of this country especially those of the Tamil community, it dawned last Sunday with Sri Lanka Army taking a crucial, important and most challenging decision they ever had taken in its history.

Lanka Army taking a crucial, important and most challenging decision they ever had taken in its history.

Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka, who steered the Sri Lanka Army to achieve one of the outstanding victories against the most ruthless terror outfit in the world amidst a most challenging scenario many Armies in the world would have feared to face, was quite confident of his decision and was awaiting the ground troops carrying out the biggest hostage rescue mission in the world.

International community

On the one hand President Mahinda Rajapaksa as the Commander in Chief and Head of State had entrusted the Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka with this task quite confidently at a time the entire international community was keeping an eye on the Sri Lankan situation and exerting huge pressure to stop military operations fearing a blood bath inside the No Fire Zone where more than 120,000 people were taken hostage by the LTTE.



Civilians in their thousands reaching the cleared areas.

So he had taken this challenging task quite confidently as he was aware that his troops are quite capable of achieving this gigantic task as the entire nation was awaiting to see a peaceful end.

On his visit to the Security Forces Headquarters in Vanni on April 18, Lt. General Fonseka made final touches to the plan for the biggest hostage rescue operation and briefed the field commander engaged in the last lap of the Vanni liberation operation, about this most sensitive operation.

Finally the 58 Division which made its victorious march along the Western coast having commenced operation from Mannar to reach the Eastern coast after passing many victorious milestones under the leadership of Brigadier Shavendra Silva was entrusted with this most decisive task, by the Army Commander.

Decisive operation

The Commando Brigade under the command of Colonel Ralph Nugera and Special Forces Brigade under the command of Colonel Athula Kodippili were also given the task of deploying enough Commando and Special Forces troops for this most sensitive and decisive operation.



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By last Sunday, the 58 Division which had completed the mission of reaching the outskirts of the No Fire Zone were ready with their ground work for this decisive operation.



The 58 Division troops were operating just 300 meters away from the No Fire Zone and were closely observing what was happening inside the Zone with the information provided by the ground troops and also through the visuals of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle of the Sri Lanka Air Force.

Operation plan

Brigadier Shavendra Silva after numerous conferences with his battalion Commanders and officers have prepared the ground suitable for this decisive operation and selected 9 Gemunu Watch battalion under the Command Lt. Colonel Lal Chandrasiri, 8 Gajaba Regiment under the command of Lt. Colonel Chandana Wickremasinghe and 11 Sri Lanka Light Infantry battalion under the command of Lt. Colonel Kithsiri Ekanayaka, for the operation.

The Commando Brigade Commander Colonel Ralph Nugera entrusted the task to the 2 Commando Regiment under the Command of Major Shamal Silva whilst Special Forces Brigade Commander Athula Kodippili decided to deploy 1 SF troops for the mission.



In spite of untold suffering at the hands of the Tigers their hopes are all written in their faces
Pictures by Rukmal Gamage

They all discussed the operations plan together and were prepared to accomplish their decisive mission on Sunday night. The task ahead of them was big. They had to capture the last LTTE defence line bordering the No Fire Zone after crossing the lagoon that separates the 58 Division defences and the No Fire Zone. The most challenging situation was that they have to achieve the goal without causing a single civilian death when they capture last LTTE defence to get the civilians free, but were not aware what would be the reaction of the civilians once they reach the Tiger earth bund.

Challenge

Heavy weapon use was strictly prohibited and each and every soldier was aware of the responsibility of achieving this task without shedding blood of the civilians.

By Sunday night the operations room of the 58 Division was ready for this task and the entire defence hierarchy was having a sleepless night to observe the result of this mission. It was at 11.30 p.m. all Infantry battalions, Commando and Special Forces battalions were to start the operations. Under the cover of thick darkness they had to reach the Tiger earth bund which was stretching in a 3 km stretch from Putumattalan to Ampalavanpokkanai where tens of thousands of civilians were trapped by the LTTE.

Three Groups from the 2 Commando Regiment were given the task to reach the Northern most edge of the earth bund along with the 8 Gajaba Regiment. The Alpha Group under the command of Captain Navaratne, Bravo Group under the command of Major Ratnayake and Delta Group under the command of Captain Samarasinghe from the 2 Commando Regiment were asked to deploy their teams for this task.

The 8 Gajaba Regiment Commanding Officer Lt. Colonel Chandana Wickremesinghe tasked his Alpha Company under the command of Captain Susantha Rajapaksa, Bravo Company under the command of Second Lt.

Ruwan Kumara who was the acting OC, Charlie Company under the command of Captain Ajith Hettiarachchi and Delta Company under the command of Captain Pubudu Rajanayaka for this mission.

Battalion troops

One SF troops were tasked to take 11 Sri Lanka Light Infantry battalion troops from the Southern part of the earth bund in Ampalavanpokkanai. Lt. Colonel Kithsiri Ekanayake deployed his Companies, Alpha Company under the command of Captain Chinthana, Bravo Company under the command of Captain Lt. Lalantha Kollurage, Charlie Company under the command of Captain Kasun Ranchagoda and Delta Company under the Command of Lt. Harshana Jinasoma for this task.

The troops of the 9 Gemunu Watch under the command of Lt. Colonel Lal Chandrasiri was given the task of advancing towards the earth bund from the middle independently.

Infantry battalions were commanded by 581 Brigade Commander Lt. Colonel Deshapriya Gunawardena and 582 Brigade Commander Colonel Sanjay Wanigasinghe whilst all the other Infantry battalions attached to the 58 Division were extending their support for the mission by various means. They all were on alert to face any eventuality during this mission.

Each battalion opted to cross the lagoon, depending on the water level of the lagoon they have to cross. By 11.30 p.m. they started their advance into the earth bund. They have been given 2 am as the H hour to reach the earth bund.

Stiff resistance

Once troops were reaching the Tiger earth bund, the LTTE started to fire at the troops from all their guard points located on the earth bund and there were stiff resistance from two guard points. But troops managed to overcome the resistance. The biggest resistance came from the Pedal Gun of the LTTE which directed the fire towards advancing troops from the beach front.

Whilst troops were advancing towards the earth bund the operations room of the 58 Division was closely monitoring the situation inside the No Fire Zone through the UAV visuals and observed that the panic stricken civilians were reaching towards the earth bund. The civilians trapped inside the No Fire Zone had got the message that the earth bund has been captured by the troops.

Safe zone

Civilians were living just 300 meters away from the earth bund and once they got the message they started to flee towards the Security Forces controlled areas leaving all their belongings there in the Safe zone.

The operation plan was changed as the troops observed the huge influx of civilians towards the military controlled areas. They started to flood into military controlled areas amidst desperate attempts by the LTTE cadres to prevent civilians from fleeing the area.

It was a difficult to figure out the number of civilians arriving towards the military controlled area as they were crossing the lagoon in thousands. The 58 Division hurriedly made arrangements to check each and every civilian arriving towards the military controlled areas.

As the LTTE failed to prevent the civilians fleeing the Safe Zone, Pottu Amman who was commanding the Tiger cadres himself deployed suicide cadres to prevent the civilians. That was the first occasion the LTTE used their human bombs against the same Tamil community who were there with the LTTE for three decades as a

shadow. There were three suicide blasts around 8 am on Monday morning which killed 17 civilians including children and women.

Civilians

Tiger cadres also directed artillery fire towards the fleeing civilians killing dozens of civilians, but could not close the flood gates through the captured earth bund.

The 7 Sri Lanka Light Infantry Battalion, 6 Gemunu Watch , 10, 14,12 and 20 Gajaba Regiments were deployed to the task of the handling the huge influx of civilians.

The true sense of a humanitarian operation was evident as soldiers engaged in this operation came out with their hearts to assist the civilians fleeing from the Safe Zone. As these civilians had to wait hours at the long queue to get clearance soldiers gave their meals to them as they could not hide their emotions once they saw thousands of children who were crying in search of food and water.

The injured civilians were immediately evacuated to hospitals whilst transporting thousands of civilians in buses to Omanthai and Vavuniya.

The flow of civilians was quite unexpected and the message was passed to President about the exodus of civilians. That prompted the President to visit the Operations Room of the Air Force Headquarters to watch the huge influx of civilians through the UAV visuals. That must be the happiest moment for the President as the scene relieved a big burden on him as Security Forces were able to achieve this task with a thumping success.

Air Force Commander Air Marshal Roshan Gunatilleke explained to the President the situation at the operations room of the Air Force headquarters. Even foreign journalists based in Colombo were invited to observe the UAV visuals as the entire world had to be enlightened about the real situation within the No Fire Zone. The panic stricken civilians opted to flee from the No Fire Zone even by sea and also towards the 55 Division area in the North of Puthumattalan. On the first day over 35,000 civilians were checked and taken into Security Forces controlled areas.

The 58 Division waited till Monday night to launch the second phase of the operation and deployed the troops to reach the eastern beach front of the No Fire Zone as the LTTE continued to use the beach front for their movements inside the No Fire Zone.

Once troops reached the beach front of the No Fire Zone it was divided into two and a section of Tiger cadres were trapped in the Northern part. The 7 Sinha Regiment troops were ordered to move in the northern direction immediately. Whilst 7 SR troops were moving towards the Northern part of the No Fire Zone troops were able to destroy number of Tiger vehicles moving on the beach front and during such attacks LTTE Batticaloa leader Ramanan got killed along with his two bodyguards.

No Fire Zone

However there were many Tiger movements in the Northern part of the No Fire Zone whilst 7 SR troops were advancing towards the North.

The 7 Sinha Regiment troops advanced some three kilometres towards the North and linked up with the 55 Division which was operating in the North of Putumattalan.

As the 58 Division troops captured the entire Northern part of the No Fire Zone in Puthumattalan the Tiger leaders pushed the remaining civilians to Valaimadam and Vellamullivaikkal.

On Wednesday morning the 58 Division deployed the 11 Sri Lanka Light Infantry battalion to advance further southwards to rescue the remaining civilians trapped inside the No Fire Zone.

By Wednesday evening once again it was decided to deploy Special Forces and Commando troops along with the 11 SLLI and 10 SLLI troops to advance towards the South as LTTE had trapped and mines in the southern part of the Safe Zone.

With the troops advancing towards the South civilians were directed towards the 53 Division to facilitate the military advance operation.

As of Wednesday evening 101,000 civilians had arrived in the Government controlled area since Monday early morning and another 10,000 to 20,000 were yet to be liberated by the troops.

Hundreds of Tiger cadres also arrived the Security Forces controlled areas mingling with the civilians and hundreds of LTTE identity cards strewn in the No Fire Zone before they arrived in the Government controlled areas.

LTTE media coordinator Daya Master and interpreter George master were nabbed by the troops as they arrived in Vavuniya mingling with the civilians. Intelligence reports indicate that Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran still hiding inside the southern part of the No Fire Zone waiting until the last moment to flee from the country.

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