



Click to enable Adobe Flash Player

HOME
Sunday, 24 May 2009

- OBSERVER ONLINE
- News**
- Editorial
- Business
- Features
- Political
- Security
- Spectrum
- Impact
- Sports
- World
- Panorama
- Junior
- Letters
- Obituaries

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

- OTHER LINKS
- Marriage Proposals
- Classifieds
- GOVERNMENT GAZETTE

Soldiers risked life and limb to save civilians

**** UAV images to identify civilian movements**

**** Divisions launch special plans amidst heavy fighting**

Dhaneshi YATAWARA in Mullaitivu



The mammoth exodus of civilians - leaving behind the dreadful past
Pix: Thilak Perera



Parents ferrying their treasures across to safety

The images from the unmanned surveillance air craft of the Sri Lanka Air Force - the UAV - sent on May 16 to the 59 Division were beyond belief. An uncountable number of people was waiting about 200 metres inland from the cause-way in the northern bank of the lagoon mouth.

It was only few hours before that troops of the 59 Division under the command of Brigadier Prasanna de Silva cleared the cause-way connecting the Nanthikadal lagoon along the A35 road, making a safety passage for the people to reach the cleared areas. Troops of the 12 Sri Lanka Light Infantry (SLLI) battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Wasantha Herath under the 593 Brigade commanded by Colonel Sujeewa Senerath Yapa gained control of the cause-way.

The approximately 800 meters long cause-way was greatly damaged by the LTTE. The satellite image maps clearly showed the damage. After clearing the cause-way from land mines, troops repaired the entire cause-way enabling mobility for the troops as well as to the escaping civilians.

With the making of a safety passage for the people to escape from the iron clutches of the LTTE, the Army started informing the civilians using public announcing systems about the safe scape routes.

Blocking the path

By this time, troops spearheading the 12 SLLI defence line saw the LTTE attempting to block the crowd. LTTE tried to stop the civilian movement blocking the passage using two large trucks. LTTE cadres under the cover of those trucks

started firing at the civilians.

[News](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Business](#) | [Features](#) | [Political](#) | [Security](#) | [Spectrum](#) | [Impact](#) | [Sports](#) | [World](#) | [Panorama](#) | [Junior](#) | [Letters](#) | [Obituaries](#) |

"Since there were civilians we couldn't fire in return. We shot in the air and made people to lie down and be in safe position and then snipped the main LTTE shooter. With this they turned one of the trucks towards our defence line but suddenly the people started running towards us passing the vehicle. The LTTE cadres couldn't do anything else other than retreat," Lt. Col. Wasantha Herath said.

Thus, by around 3 O'clock in the afternoon a huge influx of people started pouring into the cleared areas.

Before the cause-way was cleared for the helpless Tamil people to escape, Brigadier Prasanna de Silva instructed the Special Forces Divers team to create a passage from the narrowest point of the two sides. By this time the area was not cleared of LTTE threats. In a nighttime mission the Special Forces (SF) Divers team was able to tie a strong rope connecting the two sides. When the SF team reached the uncleared area some LTTE cadres had noticed their presence. Being excellent divers, the SF team managed to return successfully without being harmed.

Since the elderly, sick and wounded civilians faced a greater difficulty to cross over the murky waters of the lagoon, the troops began clearing the cause-way.

The next day, during its wee hours there was another mammoth crowd at the end of the causeway seeking relief from the Sri Lanka Army.



Brigadier Prasanna de Silva in the foreground during civilian evacuation mission

Amidst heavy resistance from the LTTE the 59 Division received over 5000 IDPs on May 16. They were escaping towards Pudukkuduyirrippu. Troops were facing a greater threat from possible suicide attacks to breach the newly-formed Army defence lines. Identifying LTTE suicide cadres entering into cleared areas was most difficult. They would explode themselves if even a soldier begins to search them. The stress was extremely heavy on the soldiers. The escape route was much easier for these civilians who were moving towards Pudukkuduyirrippu compared to those who escaped crossing the lagoon towards Mullaitivu.

TELEVISION NEWS

Vac

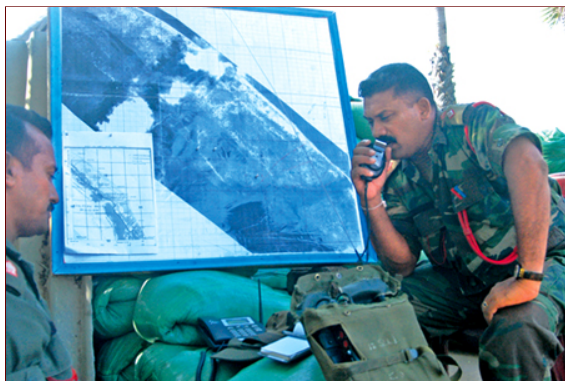
Dep

Gove

Ministry of public security, SRI LANKA

Peace Process of

DEFENCE OF THE NATION



Lieutenant Colonel Wasantha Herath during an operation to capture the causeway



Seniormost Commander in the Wannai Front, Major General Jagath Dias inspecting a transit point

But the threat to our troops was more, serious. To solve the problem Major General Kamal Gunaratne, General Officer Commanding of 59 Division, instructed his officers to make arrangements to have a close check on people and their belongings. Safety was the main concern. Special care was taken for the elderly, sick and the disabled people. The entire process ran on the untiring efforts of the soldiers.

Knowing the gravity of the humanitarian operation to save innocent lives, Major General Kamal Gunaratne apportioned the responsibility of caring for and securing the civilians among several battalions. Depending on the numbers escaping each battalion had to ensure their safety, provide them with food, water and medicine until they were sent to Vavuniya for shelter at welfare centres.

In the 59 Division, Brigadier Prasanna de Silva instructed the 591 Brigade commanded by Colonel Aruna Ariyasinghe to take care of the civilian rescue mission.

Rescuing people from the iron clutches of the Tigers is not just bringing them to the other side of the land or making safety passages for them to escape.

Vehicles to transport them needed to be arranged. Huge quantities of food had to be provided for them in addition to the responsible task of feeding thousands of officers and soldiers of the Army. Considerable resources were needed and a continuous supply chain had to be maintained, All these happened while intense fighting were continuing in the Forward Defence Lines which resulted in heavy demand for arms and ammunition, food, water, medicine, casualty evacuation etc.

Solid responsibility

Causing maximum attrition to the enemy was the prime task of Army. If helpless Tamil people are at the risk of getting caught in the cross fires, guaranteeing their lives became the Army's prime responsibility. Soldiers risked their own lives in protecting the escapees until they reached safety. This was the utmost sacrifice one could ever witness in a battlefield!

In the raging battle between life and death, the human rescue mission carried out by the Army could be a unique feat in the annals of military history.

[EMAIL](#) | [PRINTABLE VIEW](#) | [FEEDBACK](#)