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Fleeing civilians in dinghies rescued by the Navy

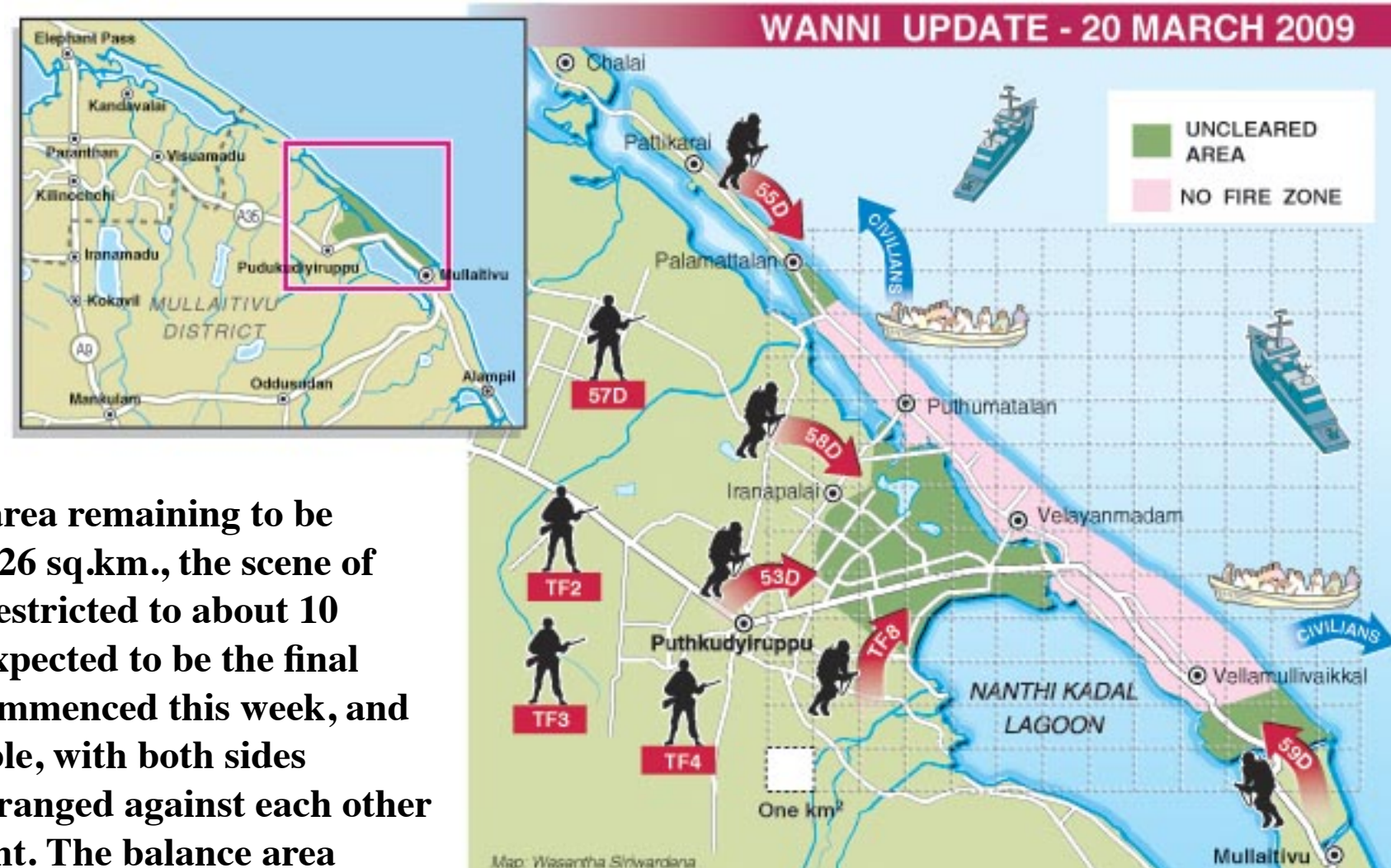


The small underwater vehicle designed for one person captured by the troops of 7 SLSR in an abandoned Sea Tiger base located in Puthukkuduyiruppu East



Sri Lankan Army soldiers operating in the south of Chalai

GRAND FINALE OF BATTLES?



Though the total area remaining to be liberated is about 26 sq.km., the scene of actual combat is restricted to about 10 sq.km., which is expected to be the final showdown that commenced this week, and the most formidable, with both sides concentrated and ranged against each other in this narrow front. The balance area

By Tissa Ravinda Perera
makes up the civilian 'Safe Zone'
Captive civilians turn on the Tigers

In another development this week, clashes between the LTTE and the civilians entrapped within the LTTE controlled area, escalated.

In one incident, terrorists attempting to abduct some children, were reportedly hacked to death by the parents. Civilians who had lost patience, hurled petrol bombs at the LTTE political office and the LTTE police station in Puttumathalan on March 17.

A clash between the LTTE police that attempted to abduct a young woman, and the civilians, ended up in four vehicles and two motorcycles of the LTTE being set on fire, and the OIC of the LTTE police being assaulted. A civilian who fled from the LTTE controlled area, revealed that a group of armed LTTE cadres rushed to the scene and brought the situation under control, after shooting dead four civilians in public.

He revealed that clashes between hardcore terrorists in the martyred families and ordinary civilians, were increasing. A woman who opposed the LTTE, was shot in the mouth and killed. In other instances, the LTTE gave chase and shot at boatloads of fleeing civilians in the deep sea and removed the boat engines.

Meanwhile, a group of civilians carrying the body of an infant killed, when their boat came under LTTE gunfire, staged a protest on March 17, and demanded that, the ICRC officials, who arrived there by sea to distribute food to the civilians in the 'No Fire' zone, take them to safety.

The civilians who fled from the 'No Fire' zone said that the ICRC representative promised to take up the issue with the Government and left. However, this particular ICRC official had not taken any step to inform authorities of this request. Human shield terrorised

The fleeing civilians accused the LTTE of plundering food stocks distributed by the ICRC, and requested the Defence establishment to suspend the shipments. They said that the majority of the civilians, who opposed the LTTE, were given only salt kanji and the children green leaf kanji.

Intelligence was received that the LTTE, which is using civilians as a protective shield, had forcibly recruited more than 1,000 cadres. The training of the latest batch of conscripts reached its fifth day on Friday.

With the intention of dragging the war till April, the LTTE has launched a massive propaganda campaign calling on civilians to join the final battle. They have been reduced to using the equipment of the Voice of Tiger clandestine broadcasting service, to launch this propaganda blitz from a van. Their strategy appears to be to continue the war till April, hoping for an Indian intervention, in view of India's general election due next month.

It was revealed that the LTTE is erecting an earth barricade and bunkers around the 'No Fire' zone, to prevent civilians from fleeing the area, because, without civilians all would be lost for them.

On March 18, the LTTE imposed a curfew from 4.00 pm to 6 am the following day to launch a search operation in the 'No Fire' zone to track down their deserters and those who oppose the LTTE.

Meanwhile, it was confirmed that, the Vattuwal area in the 'No Fire' zone has been reserved for families of prominent LTTE leaders' and made a 'forbidden' zone for other civilians.

Tiger infiltration

In another development, the LTTE's plan to infiltrate the liberated areas with its cadres in military uniforms, to launch attacks, came to light. A suicide cadre in army uniform, attempting to infiltrate the security forces lines, was detected by a soldier of the Special Forces and shot dead on the way. He was sporting the insignia and knapsack of a Special Forces soldier, who went missing during a military operation in Weli Oya area, four years ago.

In a similar manner, forces on Wednesday detected and arrested the driver of LTTE Intelligence Chief Pottu Amman. The LTTE cadre, who mingled with the civilians surrendering to the forces, was arrested by the 58 Division. When a LTTE stronghold in the south of Iranapalai, frequented by Pottu Amman, came under attack, he had decamped.

He disclosed that Prabhakaran and Pottu Amman still remained in an underground bunker in the area. He said that Pottu Amman's wife, Vatsala, an LTTE cadre from Batticaloa, and their six children had gone missing for about a month. Pottu Amman, who used four vehicles, including a white Land Cruiser, had three drivers. However, Pottu Amman who roamed about on a motorcycle, for fear of the Army's Deep Penetration Unit's attacks, uses a vehicle brought by Prabhakaran's personal security, when he needs to meet the leader.

Pottu Amman, who lives under tight security, had been in overall command of LTTE operations in Pudukudyirippu, Dharmapuram, and Kilinochchi areas, his driver has confessed.

Army Chief upfront

Army Chief Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka on Thursday visited the Wannu Brigade Headquarters and met senior military field commanders, including Security Forces Commander, Wannu, Maj. Gen. Jagath Jayasuriya.

He now intends to increase the troop strength to 70,000 soldiers from the current 50,000, to finish off the war expeditiously. Lt. Gen. Fonseka said that infantry troops who fought valiantly to overcome all enemy obstacles amid LTTE artillery and mortar fire, are responsible for the present military achievements, and that, the war might have come to an end much earlier, if the LTTE's artillery guns and mortar launchers had been interdicted before they reached the enemy.

Battling forward

Meanwhile, 55 Division, under Brig. Prasanna de Silva, that proceeded from the south of Putumathalan, breached two forward defence lines (FDL) in Pattikarai area also this week.

The 1st Light Infantry regiment (CLI) under Lt. Col. Chandana Ranweera of 55-3 Brigade commanded by Col. Mahinda Weerasuriya, achieved this objective.

By March 16, after two days of intense fighting, the soldiers who pulled down the enemy FDL, which was 80ft in length and 5ft in height, advanced to a distance of about 350 metres. Intercepted LTTE communications confirmed that 15 LTTE cadres, including its leader in charge of mortar attacks, 'Lt.Col.' Ramesh, were killed and 27 others injured in the battle.

A Sea Tiger leader, 'Lt. Col.' Sathya, and 15 other cadres were killed and 24 injured in an attack launched by 55 Division on the previous day (March 15.) In this operation, 1 CLI, with the help of the Air Force, destroyed six bunkers in the LTTE FDL.

Security forces, who breached the LTTE defence line on March 16, faced yet another challenge. General Officer Commanding (GOC) 55 Division and his deputy Brig. Nissanka Ranawana, Col. Mahinda Weerasuriya and other field commanders planned the operation. Their target was a stronger defence line about 500 metres interior of the first defence line.

1 CLI was to break into the Defence Line, while 7 Vijeyaba Regiment under Lt. Col. Deepal Pusella, provided protection from the direction of the lagoon and 4 Gemunu Watch (GW) from the direction of the beach. Alfa and Delta Companies of 1 CLI were entrusted with the task of overrunning the Defence Line.

Bravo and Charlie Companies were ordered to carry out trenching from the direction of the lagoon and the beach, and open a path.

By Thursday morning, the First Infantry troops as pre-planned overran the LTTE's second defence line in a tactical maneuver.

Intense fighting that erupted at about 10.30 a.m., continued till 6 p.m., with the security forces finally capturing the entire area. The tanks of the Mechanised Infantry under Maj. Udaya Herath provided support fire.

It was a hard battle in view of the advantage the LTTE held here, in being able to attack the forces from three directions: the sea, the lagoon and land.

Four LTTE cadres, including woman Sea Tiger leader 'Lt. Col.' Sindu, were bagged by the Army snipers in this operation, bringing the total number of Tiger cadres killed by Army snipers during the previous 48 hours to 12.

Military Intelligence believes that LTTE's 'Lt. Col.' Arunan Master, identified by his call sign Charlie Alpha, who commanded enemy cadres in the area, was also either killed or injured in the attack.

The 58 Division under Brig. Shavendra Silva, liberated a six kilometre stretch of road from Putumathalan in the 'No Fire' zone, to Pudukudyirippu junction, by Thursday. The last stretch of 300 metres on this road was liberated by the 8 Gajaba Regiment (GR). They recovered the bodies of 11 LTTE cadres, after the battle for the last stretch. With this, the soldiers were able to speed up the capture of the entirety of Pudukudyirippu. It also provided the opportunity to open a supply route and to deploy battle tanks.

The road was liberated by the 9 GW, 10 GR, and 8 GR.

The 11 CLI under Lt. Col. Kithsiri Ekanayaka, advanced from Putumatalan and captured the main road to Pudukudyirippu, after a 12-hour battle on March 16.

Security forces recovered eight 'Baba' mortar launchers and a 12ft long 'Pandithar' 1550 rocket shell, during the search operation that followed

Fire from 'No Fire'

Meanwhile, the LTTE launched 22 artillery rounds on the security forces, with the 152mm and 122mm artillery guns installed in the 'No Fire' zone. Nine soldiers were killed and 35 injured in the artillery attack.

Although the security forces have identified the locations of the artillery guns, they are not permitted to attack them due to the international outcry. However, the LTTE, favoured by foreign countries and international organisations, is at liberty to fire from the 'No Fire' zone. The security forces are not allowed to retaliate despite suffering casualties.

Relentless advance

Meanwhile, 20 GR under Lt Col Kumar Peiris, captured Iranapalai junction, where LTTE intelligence leader Pottu Amman's underground housing complex and several LTTE camps were located.

20 GR entered the Roman Catholic Tamil Mixed School amid intense fighting on March 17. The LTTE plane, shot down by the F-7 combat aircraft of the Air Force on September 9, 2008, crashed into this school yard.

Within an hour of the capture of Iranapalai junction, the security forces came under attack by a group of about 100 LTTE cadres, but it was repulsed. A wave of about six attacks continued till Wednesday (18), but to no avail. Intercepted LTTE messages revealed that 26 cadres were killed and 41 others injured in these counterattacks to dislodge the forces. The GR was able to advance about 900 metres in two days.

Tiger 'dens' captured

"Every house in Iranapalai is evidently an abode of a Black Tiger family. Photos of Prabhakaran and the Sea Tigers killed in action have been hung on the walls of every house. There are indications that the LTTE's underground warehouses are here," a senior military officer said.

The Ponnambalam hospital in Pudukudyirippu was captured by the 9 GW under Lt. Col Lal Chandrasiri of 58 division. The LTTE vehicles that came to recapture the hospital, came under attack by the Fifth Armoured Corp under Lt. Col. Nihal Samarakoon.

Separate rooms, complete with all facilities, had been reserved for the LTTE leaders, including Balraj. It was a hospital for the LTTE leaders. Head of the LTTE Economic Development Division, Karikalan's wife called Kama Aunty, was the director of the fully equipped hospital with operating theatres.

In a major find, 7 Sinha Regiment of 58 Division, recovered another submarine from a main Sea Tiger camp in the Iranapalai area. A senior military officer in the operational area said the submarine in the shape of a whale, was about 20ft long and that it had been used.

Pushing forward

The 581 Brigade under Col. Deshapriya Gunawardene and 582 Brigade under Col. Sanjaya Wanigasinghe, were involved in the operations, while the 583 Brigade under Lt. Col. Ramesh Fernando was manning the defence lines.

The search operation to track down the LTTE infiltrators in government controlled areas, were continuing after recent behind-the-lines attacks

Task Force 8 under Col. G.V. Ravipriya and 53 Division under Maj. Gen Kamal Gunaratne were engaged in operations from the direction of Pudukudyirippu south along the A-35 Pranthan-Mullaithivu main road towards north.

The 682 Brigade under Lt. Col. Subhashana Welikala broke down a 900 metre earth barrier on Wednesday and advanced about 700 metres into LTTE territory. Bravo Company under Capt. Krishantha of 18 GW and Delta Company under Lt. Kumara broke down the earth barricade. The operation that commenced at 3 a.m. lasted till 8 a.m.

LTTE leaders Theepan and Pulashti launched continual counter-attacks to deter the advancing forces, but to no avail. It was revealed that the Pulasthi group later went missing.

The LTTE attempted to retain the strategically important area by using maximum gunfire to prevent 682 Brigade that was advancing along the A-35 highway, from capturing their last supply route.

During the battle, the security forces came under artillery fire from the 'No Fire' zone. Sea Tiger leader Soosai was heard over intercepted LTTE communications, ordering artillery fire to halt 682 Brigade's drive.

Appointments / Promotions

Addition of new Divisions to the Army and change of Command took place last week. Col. Nugera, who earned a reputation in the battlefield during the Eelam War, was appointed as the new Commander of the Commando Regiment. Defence Coordinator- Army Headquarters, Brig. Asoka Amunugama was appointed Head of the Minneriya Infantry Training School. Brig. Maitree Dias was appointed Defence Coordinator and Col. Shantha Dissanayake was appointed Security Advisor- Sri Lankan Embassy in China.

Col. Dhammika Jayasundare was appointed to the new 594 Brigade, Lt. Col. Jaliya Senaratne to the 595 Brigade, Lt. Col. Kirithi Gunasoma to the 633 Brigade, Lt. Col. P.K.A. Pilapitiya to the 573 Brigade and Col. D.K. Jayatillake to the 574 Brigade.

Meanwhile, 52 Lieutenant Colonels were promoted Colonels by Military Secretary Brig. G.S. Padumadasa on March 17.

