



How top secret visit went through

Hinting of a final push to crush what remains of the LTTE, now hiding among the civilians in the 'No Fire' Zone (NFZ), President Rajapaksa, who made a historic and surprise visit to Kilinochchi on Thursday, to celebrate the New Year with the forces, said: "We are all tired, let us finish this off soon."

During this first visit to Kilinochchi by a President of this country, Rajapaksa reiterated that, amidst all the pressures exerted by the international community to bail out the LTTE, he was determined to go on with the fight till the last Tiger is defeated, and rescue all civilians held hostage by them.



This visit was arranged by Army Chief Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka, on a directive of the President, who wanted to be in Kilinochchi on April 16.

The directive to the Army Chief was made after the President visited wounded soldiers at the Army hospital, and inquired of their welfare and gave them New Year gifts. Seeing the brave sacrifices made by the wounded soldiers, made the President feel obliged to visit their colleagues in the front.

Keeping the visit of the President top secret, the Army Chief immediately made necessary

security arrangements. The Division Commanders were advised of a visiting dignitary to Kilinochchi and given instructions to make arrangements. The orders given 36 hours ahead were set in motion, anticipating a visit by the Army Chief. The security services chiefs received the news of the President's visit only on April 15. At the frontlines, only two Division Commanders and their deputies were informed of it.

Brig. Jagath Alwis, Head of the Presidential Security Division (PSD) visited Kilinochchi on April 15, to make the necessary arrangements with the security chiefs there. The task of providing security to the President's visit was entrusted to 57 Division.

By Thursday morning, all of Kilinochchi had been turned into a high security zone. The same morning, vehicles carrying the President and other top men arrived at Army Headquarters grounds one by one, as a few Air Force helicopters were ready to take them. The dignitaries took off immediately to Vavuniya and from there, under heavy security, again took off to Kilinochchi. Wanni Security Forces Commander Maj. Gen. Jagath Jayasuriya joined the party in Vavuniya.

VIPs arrive

By 9:05 a.m., the first chopper landed at the Kilinochchi Central College ground. Included in this entourage to wish and greet the brave soldiers for the New Year in the Wanni, were Defence Chief of Staff Air Chief Marshal Donald Perera, Army Commander Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka, Navy Commander Vice Admiral Wassantha Karanngaoda, Air Force Commandant Air Marshal Roshan Goonatilleka, IGP Jayantha Wickramaratna, Director General- Civil Defence Force, Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera and Commandant - Special Task Force, DIG L.M. Sarathchandra.

Next to land at 9:10 a.m. was the chopper carrying Presidential Secretary Lalith Weeratunga, Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and other dignitaries.

At 9:30 a.m., the special VIP chopper Bell 412 carrying the President, landed in front of the former Tiger hospital complex at Kilinochchi.

He was welcomed by GOC 57 Division Maj. Gen. Jagath Dias, GOC 58 Division Brig. Shavendra Silva and other senior officers.

After the guard of honour from the 17 Gajaba Regiment, the President was taken to the conference hall arranged in the hospital complex.

On battles fought and won

Here, Maj. Gen. Jagath Dias outlined the operational successes of 57 Division to the VIPs, beginning in Thampennai, through Periyathampennai, Madhu, Periya Madhu, Thunukkai and Mallavi to Kilinochchi, and the battles won by the Division to get there. Brig. Shavendra Silva then gave an account of the battles fought by 58 Division from Mannar, through Yoda Wewa, the Rice Bowl, Vedithalathiu, Poonaryn, Paranthan and Kilinochchi to Pudukudyirippu.

Festivities

The traditional oil lamp was then lit to begin the New Year festivities organised there. A token of the Avurudu gifts brought by the President, was distributed amongst representative Officers of the two Divisions. They were CO 8 SLLI, Lt. Col. Ipshitha Dissanayaka, CO 9 Gemunu Watch (GW), Lt. Col. Lal Chandrasiri and two Platoon commanders and some troops.

There upon, the President wished Deputy Commander 57 Division Col. Mahinda Weerasuriya and Deputy Commander 58 Division Col. Suraj Bangsajaya and the Brigade commanders.

The traditional food prepared for the occasion had been placed on Lotus leaves. The President, arriving at the table, suggested to everyone to eat a 'Kokis' made from an improvised mould made out of a mortar shell's tail and invited all to partake in the traditional fare. The table was open to all. Officers and other ranks were seen freely chatting with the President and the Defence Secretary. The two top Defence men in the country too, sought information on battlefield incidents from these men.

Guided tour and departure

They were then taken by WMZs to Kilinochchi town, with the Army Chief riding in the same armoured personnel carrier as the President.

The President and his entourage got a view of the water tank built by the Government and blown up by the fleeing Tigers. While travelling through Kilinochchi, the President was seen taking short walks on the Jaffna-Kandy A9 road, as he inspected some of the places.

The President looked more at ease walking around and inquiring, in Kilinochchi than in Colombo. Then, with a look at the Tiger leadership's dwellings and the Tiger Peace Secretariat, they completed the tour at the headquarters of 58 Division.

After being shown the heavy artillery, battle tanks, arms and ammunition recovered from the Tigers, the President bade farewell and left Kilinochchi at 11:05 a.m.

While the final battle was being fought 34 km away from Kilinochchi, the President's historic tour was being concluded.

The visit by these dignitaries was a definite moral booster for the troops.

Unilateral ceasefire

The President's declaration of a temporary ceasefire on April 13 and 14, gave an opportunity to civilians trapped in the NFZ to escape, and the Tigers to lay down arms and surrender.

But, the LTTE, as in the past, was seen strengthening their security rings and preparing for an all out assault, as soon as the ceasefire was announced.

Although the troops ensured that not a single bullet was fired during the two-day ceasefire, the Tigers, however, fired on 58 Division. Two 6 GW soldiers were shot at by Tiger snipers and 10 SLLI was targeted with at least eight rounds of Tomba and Arul rounds.

While this was the scenario, the British and the French sought another ceasefire, obviously, to rescue the Tigers, stating that, the two-day ceasefire offered by the government was not sufficient to get the civilians under Tiger control, into the liberated areas. Those held hostage by the Tigers included families of their dead and living cadres called Mahaveer. Without taking into consideration their plight, all what the Tigers did during the two days on offer, was to strengthen their security ring around the NFZ.

Tamil Diaspora protests

During the past few days, many protest marches were seen in Europe, by Tiger supporters living in those countries as political refugees, calling on the Sri Lankan Government to immediately stop operations in the Wannu. They are quite aware of their position once the fighting is over and the Tigers are defeated, they would be deported to Sri Lanka by the thousands. They are contributing to the Tiger coffers to keep up the Eelam dream, so they could remain overseas.

Foiling the dreams of these Tiger supporters in Europe, by winning the final battle as soon as possible, is the aim of our brave troops.

Human shield redeployed

While Government troops are getting ready to break into the NFZ and release the captive civilian population, the Tigers are now moving them to coastal areas from Pudumattalan, Walayarmadam and Ampalavanpokanai. This is due to forces gaining on the NFZ via the land link from Pudukudyiruppu, between the two lagoons.

It has been revealed that the Tiger leadership has ordered its junior officers and its cadres to try and hold on to their positions, and not allow any civilians to get out until May 15. Their next move is to put pressure on India, via Tamil Nadu, to stop operations by Government troops, before their General elections results are announced on May 16.

Meanwhile, with the idea of delaying the SL armed forces, the Tigers are engaged in manufacturing landmines and 81mm mortar bombs and extensively mining the surroundings of the NFZ. The anti-personnel mines are also meant to prevent civilians escaping from the NFZ.

Overcoming ditch-earth bunds

Troops of 53 Division under Maj. Gen. Kamal Guneratna, were able to demolish two security bunds heavily laden with mines during the week leading into the New Year. Lt. Col. Rohan Palayangoda commanding 5 GW and Lt. Col. Ajantha Wijesuriya commanding 1 GW, coming under the Airborne Brigade commanded by Col. Thilak Hangilipola, took part in this operation.

These troops were entrusted with the task of advancing from Nandikadal lagoon and penetrating an earthen wall built across the A-35 (Paranthan-Mulativu) road.

After the capture of Pudukudyiruppu, 53 Division and Task Force VIII, were given the task of capturing 2.5 km stretch of the A-35 road.

Capturing this stretch to the NFZ, could result in the zone being split up into two parts. The Wellamullawaikal area, where the Tiger leadership is in, and the Pudumattalan area, where

civilians are held.

The first security ring built to prevent the troops advancing on this stretch was set on an open area, with the Tigers notorious ditch-cum-bund. The bund was eight feet high and the trench in front was 10 feet deep.

One battlefield commander who took part in the operation said "The Tiger security wall was full of landmines and the deep trench in front too, meant instant death. Daytime surveillance not being possible, we decided to take it during the night. Since 53 Division had night capabilities, the final plans were laid out."

Accordingly, on April 11, at midnight, 5 GW and 1 GW approached the security wall, but it spelt disaster, with mines setting off, warning the Tigers that the troops were at the wall.

A deadly exchange of fire ensued. The infantry was given backup fire by the Ninth Artillery Regiment and the Fourth Armoured Regiment with its tanks. Amidst the deadly booby traps and mines, troops were able to take the wall on April 12 by 8:00 a.m.

Heavy artillery and mortar fire from the NFZ continued, as the ensuing fight progressed into the late evening. In a search operation conducted at one end of the captured security ring, soldiers unearthed 1,400 mines.

Tiger leader Velavan, who had conducted the fight, had been heard screaming repeatedly: "Don't let go of the wall, as we have nowhere else to go."

The battle left 39 Tigers dead and many more injured, and unable to be taken for treatment. Declaration of the unilateral ceasefire on April 13 and 14, in the immediate aftermath of the capture of this vital defence ring, gave these troops some well earned rest. Three hundred metres in front of the first security ring was the second ring with trenches.

The two-day ceasefire was used by the troops to survey the next battlefield area and were ready to take the second ring at dawn on Wednesday (15). Meanwhile, the Tigers too had used the two-day ceasefire to fortify themselves, and launched an assault at 3.30 a.m. the same day, to regain the earth bund.

As the troops were in readiness to capture the second security ring, the unexpected Tiger onslaught was successfully repulsed. Amidst heavy exchanges, troops eventually captured the second security ring fairly easily.

Summing up the fight, a field commander said, "The LTTE came to retake their first security ring, and in the process, lost their second ring too. Our troops fought with great courage, and managed to advance another 300 metres by Thursday. We had never come across such heavily mined and booby trapped terrain in any of the previous Wannu battles."

At the same time, Task Force VIII, under Col. Ravipriya, with 53 Division, advanced on the banks of Nandikadal lagoon. Troops of 68-2 Brigade of Task Force VIII, under Lt. Col. Subhashana Welikala, under which was 18 GW, commanded by Lt Col. Rienzi Fernando, while securing their assigned areas, came under heavy Tiger fire, but they fought back and completed their tasks. 68-2 Brigade was also involved in advancing from Nandikadal lagoon towards Wellamullawaikal direction, where the Tiger leaders were berthed with their family members. The Tigers put up heavy resistance to prevent these troops getting into the area.

Arms haul

5 GW under 53 Division, in the meantime, found four Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAM) left buried by the Tigers. They were wrapped and sealed tight in cloth and polythene. Inspections proved that these were buried on February 16, prior to the battle for a Tiger defence bund captured by troops on March 23. The back portion of a 130 mm heavy gun too, was found buried. It is the first time that four brand new SAM's were found buried.

The 10 SLLI Battalion of 58 Division, operating 100 metres from the NFZ, approached a well secured earthen wall covering the NFZ, took out enemy cadres in the ring, one by one.

Trained sharpshooters from Diyatalawa, who were with these troops, took out 26 terrorists on April 12. They had already taken 17 the previous day.

Hostage rescue plans

58 Division and 53 Division having approached the NFZ, made up final plans for the securing of civilian hostages in the grasp of the Tigers.

Forces to be deployed in the final battle were increased, after reassessment of the needs by the Army Commander. Accordingly, the best attack units in the forces, the Special Forces were further strengthened with the addition of Fifth Special Forces Battalion under Maj. Nissanka Irriyagama who has led it from the beginning, the Fourth Special Forces commanded by Maj. Thushara Mahalekam, the Third Special Forces commanded by Maj. Prasanna and Maj. Chandimal Pieris as the Operations Executive at the Special Forces headquarters and Col. Athula Kodippili as the commander of the Special Forces Brigade.



Rivira Media Corporation Ltd., 742, Maradana Road, Colombo 10, Sri Lanka
Tele: +94 11 4708888 (General Line),
Fax: +94 11 4708800, +94 11 4622481

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