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## Army plans 'No Fire Zone' capture



By Tissa Ravindra Perera

The attempt to capture the eastern side of the last Tiger fortress at Puthukudyirippu, turned into bitter fighting this week. This battle could also decide the fate of the LTTE.

The heavy fighting erupted as troops of 58 Division linked up with those of Task Force VIII coming under 53 Division at Pachchapulmudai Junction, on Wednesday (1). With this link up, the Tigers who had been relentlessly battling for weeks, without letting up, to hold on to the last sector of Puthukudyirippu, got surrounded in the same area, most unexpectedly.

The Tiger frontline fighters were so busy fighting that, they did not realise that they were trapped, till a few hours later. The historic final battle to rescue the civilians in the 'No Fire' zone (NFZ) from the LTTE, will commence after the Tigers are relieved of this last piece of territory.

It is likely to get into the history books as the biggest effort to release hostages. Five Divisions are set to surround the NFZ to free the civilians held hostage. How they will accomplish this task is a mystery, but it is learnt that the forces are weighing several options.

The exact number of civilians held by the Tigers in the NFZ, is still not known. Two Tamil civilians working for the UN in the uncleared area, reached Army positions early this week. They had placed the number of civilians in the zone around 150,000. Since they were considered strong supporters of the LTTE, the security forces are reluctant to accept such figures as accurate.

Although the UN has claimed that these two were the last of the UN employees in the uncleared area, there are intelligence reports that, there is another holding a satellite-phone of the world body in the area.



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Meanwhile, there is confirmation that, during fighting in the past few weeks, a large number of leadership rank Tigers were either killed or wounded in battle.

### **Attempt to take Prabha's wounded son to Malaysia for treatment**

During the battle that ensued when a group of rebels who broke through the defence line of the 11 Artillery Regiment of 58 Division on March 05, were detected, Charles Anthony, Prabhakaran's son, was among the cadres injured in the fierce assault on their positions.

The incident occurred while this particular group was trying to reach the NFZ, along with Swarnam and Lawrence, who too were injured in the firefight.

Intelligence reports have confirmed that Charles Anthony had been hit on the shoulder and the back area. At first, although reports said that Swarnam had died, later it was revealed that one of his legs had been amputated. Some fleeing Tiger cadres have told the military that the other leg too will have to go, and it is due to this, the LTTE was trying to send Swarnam and Charles Anthony to Malaysia by sea, for treatment.

Lawrence, although suffering from minor injuries, is reported to be directing operations via walky-talkies. The forces had heard him giving instructions to another field commander, to continue fighting, as he was unable to come to the front.

### **Pottu Amman, Kapil Amman have close shave**

Pottu Amman and his deputy Kapil Amman, were slightly injured, during an air assault on their command centre in the Puthukudyirrippu area. This was revealed this week by cadres who had worked under Kapil Amman, when they surrendered to the Army. The duo had managed to escape with minor injuries, due to the command centre being situated in a fortified building with an underground bunker. The number one and two of Tiger Intelligence had been treated at a place in Iranapalai, and taken to the NFZ, according to these fleeing cadres.

A senior Tiger intelligence cadre, who surrendered to the Army, has also revealed that Ratnam Master, who was appointed head of Tiger Military Intelligence and the Radha Regiment that provides security to Prabhakaran, had been killed in another air raid. In recent days, it was revealed that, a special Tiger strike force is being trained under Ratnam Master, inside the NFZ. Ratnam Master had been put in charge of Tiger Intelligence, after a series of operations launched in the south by Pottu Amman failed, and many Tiger leaders were killed by the Army's deep penetration teams.

More than 25 Tigers, who served Tossi intelligence service under Pottu Amman and his deputy Kapil Amman, escaped from the LTTE, along with fleeing civilians, and surrendered to the security forces this week

Last weekend, on one day alone, 82 hard core LTTEs escaped with civilians and surrendered to the Army. During this period, at least 10 Tigers holding the rank of 'Lt Col.', are among those who surrendered to the Army. Fleeing cadres have revealed that a majority of those sent to Colombo on suicide missions, are disguised as Muslims.

Tiger military commander Theepan's family surrenders

Tiger military commander Theepan's elder sister and family members have surrendered to the security forces, having escaped from the LTTE grip. Theepan was once in charge of the northern battlefield and its artillery unit. His younger brother was a member of the Charles Anthony Regiment and was killed in action. Three elder brothers are living in Canada.

Hundreds of children, entrusted by their parents to the priest of the Valayarmadam church, to prevent them from being abducted by the LTTE, had been allegedly handed over by this clergyman to the Tigers. Some of these parents, who have since escaped from the LTTE clutches, have complained to the Army, that they had handed over to the priest about 600 children, and the clergyman, in turn, had handed over 550 of them to the LTTE.

The Director of Military Intelligence confirmed the deaths of the leader of the Charles Anthony brigade, Gopith alias 'Kobith' and its special leader Amuthab, in Puthukudyirrippu, in clashes with security forces this week. In addition, head of the LTTE Technical Division, Kirupakaran was also killed this week. With these reversals, Tiger plans to attack in the south and on Army positions, have been crippled a great deal.

### **STF kills Tiger unit that terrorised South**

Thirteen Tiger cadres, including its explosives expert in the East, "Paramanadan Master", who terrorised the Panama and Yala areas in the South, were killed by the Special Task Force (STF) on Friday around 9.45 am, at a place called Hakurusiybalawa in the Panama area, and recovered their weapons. The STF killed this group

during a special operation in the area. Among those killed were two women LTTEers. Security forces have established that they belonged to the Eastern Tiger leader Ram's group, but it is not known whether Ram was among those killed.

The Tiger team staged daring operations in the deep South, especially, in close proximity to the hometown of President Rajapaksa. Search operations begun by special STF teams on Thursday, resulted in this major hit the following morning.

Commander- Commando Regiment, Col. Ralph Nugera was holding fort this week for Maj. Gen. Jagath Dias as Commander of 57 Division.

Two groups of Tigers, who managed to penetrate the defence line at two separate places, and were attempting to stage attacks behind Army lines, were killed by the troops. In one place, seven members of the LTTE's Kutti Sri mortar regiment were killed and their arms recovered along with a satellite phone.

Another group had been spotted inside Army lines in the Piramanthalkulam area. They had with them 30 "Haiti Combat" uniforms, a satellite phone and a large stock of arms. It is believed their aim was to disguise as officers and soldiers and launch assaults from within Army held areas.

The final battle in the Puthukudyirippu is now on under Maj. Gen. Kamal Gunaratna, commanding 53 Division, Brig. Shavendra Silva commanding 58 Division and Col. G.V. Ravipriya commanding Task Force VIII.

After the fall of all supply routes from the NFZ to Puthukudyirippu into Army hands, the Tigers have converted a footpath from the NFZ across the lagoon, as their new supply route.

On March 16, the 11 Sri Lanka Light Infantry Regiment under Lt. Col. Kithsiri Ekanayaka, intercepted all roads leading to Puthukudyirippu from Pudumattalan, and closed all supply routes. Thereafter, the LTTE had developed the footpath, as their new supply route to Puthukudyirippu. The closing of this last route from Ampalawanpokkanai in the NFZ to Pachchapulmudai Junction, also became the responsibility of the 11 Infantry Regiment.

The open area in front of this route had been made into a security ring of about 600 metres by the Tigers, to be used as a firing range to halt any troop movement. Fierce fighting erupted when the Army tried entering this area on March 31, with six soldiers killed and 10 wounded.

### **Change of attack plan**

Commander of 58 Division, Brig. Silva, with the commander of 58-1 Brigade Col. Deshapriya Gunawardena, immediately changed the attack plan. With the change of tactics, the 11 Infantry Regiment, which was only about 120 metres from the Tiger security ring, dispatched small squads with claymore bombs weighing about 12 kilos, each moving forward on all fours and fixed them in 12 spots along the security ring. By 12.00 midnight, having completed their mission, they were back in their FDLs.

Around 2:20 am on Wednesday, the Tigers, who were without any sleep, and on the watch in their defence ring, were blown to bits within seconds, and the defence ring reduced to rubble.

Lt. Harsha Jinasoma who commanded Delta Company and Charley Company commanded by Lt. Halwatura advanced through the ring as it was destroyed by the claymore blasts. The fierce fighting that erupted between the two sides, with the destruction of the enemy security ring, continued till 5:00 p.m.

All efforts of the Tigers to hold on to the route and the junction, were thwarted by the Army's firepower. The 11 Infantry Regiment was also after the strategically important junction, and did not let go. Lt. Col. Kalpa Sanjeeva leading 5 Vijeyaba Regiment of 68-1 Brigade under Lt. Col. Lalantha Gamage, advanced South to North of that territory.

The 11 Infantry that advanced under heavy Tiger fire, found an armour-plated boat. It resembled a Dvora fast attack craft of the Navy. It was, however, without its armaments, which had been stripped by the fleeing Tigers. The length of the boat was about 20 feet. This was the first time an armour-plated boat of this nature had been found. Soldiers also recovered the bodies of 15 Tiger cadres, one of whom was believed to be that of a leader, close to which body was found an M-16 assault rifle and a jacket containing a pistol.

Under the direct leadership of Lt. Gen Sarath Fonseka, the Army managed to corner the Tigers into a pocket the shape of a bay. The Army Chief monitored the battle closely until Wednesday night and ordered the strengthening of areas likely to be hit by enemy retaliatory strikes. He also personally supervised the strengthening of a second security ring.

After cornering the Tigers into a pocket, the Army Chief wasted no time in inducting the Special Forces and Commandos into the region as reinforcements.

After securing the second ring in this manner, troops under the direct supervision of Brig. Shavendra Silva, were deployed on search and destroy missions to get at the trapped Tigers.

9 Gemunu Watch under Lt. Col. Lal Chandrasiri, penetrated a defensive bund of the Tigers, amidst heavy fighting. 8 Gajaba Regiment (GR), under Lt. Col. Chandana Wickramasinghe, 14 GR, under Maj. Janaka Pallekumbura, 20 GR, under Maj. Kumara Peiris and the 11 Infantry troops, following a battle on Thursday, found 31 bodies of Tiger cadres, 50 T-56 guns, 1 GPS machine, 2 RPG's, 1 M-16 gun, 2 radio communicating sets and 1 MPMG.

About 50 Tigers were seen trying to save a heavy 122mm artillery piece stuck in the area.

In the whole battle, the firepower of the Fifth Armoured Regiment under Lt. Col. Nihal Samarakoon, was a great asset to the infantry. "The Army is surrounding and hammering us, we cannot face the fire," Tiger battlefield commanders were heard telling Banu, their commanding officer, over the radio.



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