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Army told no heavy weapons, not Prabha

By Tissa Ravindra Perera.

Troops of the advancing Divisions were able to restrict Velupillai Prabhakaran, to five square kilometres this week.

By Friday (1), 58 and 53 Divisions were advancing on the Mullaitivu-Paranthan (A35) road towards the final Tiger hideout at Vellamullavaikal.

As the noose tightened on the remaining Tiger diehards, the Western vested interests too were making determined efforts to send an international team of observers into the country. China has rejected the proposal for this purpose for the fifth occasion at the UN Security Council.

West in their hypocritical element

The Tiger friendly international forces were bent on exerting maximum pressure, even through inspired media leaks against the country and the security forces (SF), to save the LTTE core from annihilation, in the guise of intervening on humanitarian grounds to save trapped civilians. This is despite more than 100,000 IDPs being rescued by the SF since April 20, from Tiger clutches, after being held as human shields.

The Army Commander has been given a free hand by the Government, to carry on with the task of completing the job of completely routing the LTTE, despite the objections of these international forces. Although the military were ordered by the Government to stop the use of heavy arms, no international group has compelled the Tigers to stop using its heavy arms and mortars from this zone, originally set aside by the Government as a safe refuge for fleeing IDPs.

The Tigers had been laying booby traps at Vellamullawaikal, using mortar and heavy artillery shells. They have used the huge explosions caused by such booby traps to accuse SF of using heavy arms on innocent civilians.

The final fortress of the Eelam War, may have about another 20,000 civilians, who are either detained against their will as a human shield and as labourers or, are members of their Maveer families. Most of these civilians held by the Tigers are used for their war efforts, after being given a short training. The Tiger leaders are hiding among these people, hoping that, outside pressure would force the Government to halt its military drive, for them to escape.

Army Chief Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka points out that, the Tigers are yet using heavy arms and mortars against the SF, from the tiny area they are in.

If not for the trapped civilians, the Govt. forces are capable of using their heavy arms, including multi barrel rocket launchers, to flatten the area completely, within a couple of hours. But the aim of the Army and everyone else is to do the job with zero civilian casualties.

Earth Bund by Earth Bund

Taking down the bund at Vallayarmadam was the next task of 58 Division under Brig. Shavendra Silva. Having breached the Tiger bund from Putumattalan to Ampalavanpokkinai on April 20, and rescued more than 100,000 hostages held by the Tigers behind that bund, the troops were then under orders to advance from there.

On April 24, when we visited the area, troops were already advancing, having commenced the operation.

Troops of 58 Division were entrusted with the forward operations, while keeping the Special Forces and Commandos as the second security ring.

The first phase of the operation came under, Lt. Col. Samantha Wickramasena Commanding 10 Infantry Battalion (SLLI). Lt. Col. Nandana Chandrasekera Commanding 12 Gemunu Watch (GW), and Maj. Janaka Pallekumbura Commanding 14 Gajaba Regiment (GR)). The Fifth Armoured Corp under Lt. Col. Nihal Samarakoon, provided support from the coast. By April 25, troops of 12 GW advanced from the lagoon side, 10 SLLI advanced from the beach.

All operations had to be launched under cover of darkness, as the terrain was virtually open country with no cover. A tree or a bush was a rarity. Tents and improvised shelters left by fleeing IDPs were not the best



Cpl. I.R. Premasiri
alias 'Nero'

cover for advancement. The scorching sun over this barren land too, was unbearable for any daytime movements.

The six-foot high Tiger bund was overrun. Tiger heavy arms fire and sniper attacks on this narrow stretch, ensured casualties among the soldiers.

Then 20 and 14 GR advanced towards Valaayarmadam, and by dawn of April 27, had advanced some 850 metres.

The 14 GR advanced along the lagoon and 20 GR by the shore. Heavy fighting erupted there, as the Tigers used their boats stationed along the coast, which were fitted with peddle operated anti aircraft guns.

The battle tanks on shore joined in and destroyed one Tiger boat while the Navy destroyed another. The previous day (26) Tigers used boats from the Vellamullavaikal area to attack and three of their boats were blown up by the Navy.

Alpha Company under Lt. Chandrasekera of 20 GR, that advanced towards Vallayarmadam, found the armoured vehicle used by Tiger leaders. It was built in the shape of a WMZ vehicle used by senior army officers for secure travel. It was built with armour that could withstand an RPG attack, and was a massive 10-wheeler.

One by one

On the day this vehicle was discovered, three Tiger cadres firing an anti aircraft gun, were taken out by Army snipers. Over 30 Tigers were killed by the snipers within two days.

As the Tigers are hiding among the civilians, it is only these snipers who can take them out with pinpoint accuracy. On April 28, Cpl. I.R. Premasiri alias 'Nero', a sniper responsible for the deaths of 180 Tiger cadres, was killed, when he fell to a Tiger sniper's bullet. Snipers attached to 10 SLLI were responsible for taking out a Senior Tiger dismounting from a cab, while on a visit to the frontline.

Tiger 'sister'

The 10 SLLI was involved in the rescue operation of three priests and 14 sisters at Vallayarmadam Pentecostal Church. When the troops were advancing, about 5,000 civilians had been beaten and chased towards Vellamullavaikal. On arrival, they found only those church members and 17 old and feeble civilians.

On questioning those found in the church, intelligence discovered that one of the 'sisters' was, in fact, an LTTE cadre, who had served the LTTE's 'Malathi' armour regiment for six years.

Destroying sand fortresses

The 10 SLLI and 12 GW were entrusted with taking the final bund at Valaayarmadam. The operation started around midnight of April 28 and continued up to 4.00 a.m (29). Tigers were ready with their suicide cadres. They even sent in a lorry laden with explosives toward the well secured security ring and blasted it. A cab packed with explosives was also blasted in similar fashion.

But such suicide attacks could not stall the forces onslaught on the Tigers.

On the night of April 27, the Air Mobile Brigade of the 53 Division, broke through the earth bund at Vallayarmadam, after heavy fighting.

CO Air Mobile Brigade, Lt. Col. Thilak Hangilipola, and CO 5 GW, of the same Brigade, Lt. Col. Rohan Palayangoda, were involved in this operation.

The 5 GW troops, amidst heavy fighting, broke through the earth bund and entered Vallayarmadam, after advancing about 400 metres.

This bund, built from Ampalavanpokkanai to Vallayarmadam, stretches for about two kilometers in the NFZ. The 1 GR troops were deployed to give flank cover to 5 GW.

In addition to this operation, the SLLI Bns. of 58 Division, took the bund situated to the front of this area, West of Vallayarmadam toward the shore. That too was accomplished amidst heavy fighting.

Encirclement

On the morning of April 30, Army Chief Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka met with the ground commanders of the Wannu operation.

He ordered 53 Division, which had advanced up to the Paranthan-Mulaitivu road, and was stationed in the vicinity of the NFZ, to advance towards Vellamullavaikal.

The forward operations of 59 Division, which had been stationed south of Vellamullavaikal, passing the lagoon-mouth, going from Mulaitivu, have been handed over to GOC 55 Division, Brig. Prasanna de Silva, in recognition of his leadership of the 55 Division, all the way from Muhamalai to Nagarkovil to Chalai to Chundikulam- 70 km, with a minimum casualties among his men, while hammering and capturing Sea Tiger camps.

During this period, Brig. Chagee Gallage has been appointed to oversee 55 Division. He is presently serving as the Army's Training Director.

Inroads into the NFZ

On the instructions of the Army Chief, troops of 53 Division, broke through the main Tiger obstacle, to get into the NFZ via A35, advancing to Vellamullaivaikal.

The 5 Vijayaba Regiment (VR) under Lt. Col. Kalpa Sanjeeva and 17 GW under Lt. Col. Keerthi Kottewatta were deployed into this battle.

The battle that erupted to gain access to the NFZ via the (Shoe) bridge on the A-35, was a difficult one, and continued for a week. Taking advantage of the open area there, the Tigers not only used snipers, but rained 122 mm artillery attacks.

Therefore, the plan was to get this area not by charging, but strategically.

Accordingly, 5 VR advanced along a route north of A35 to Vallayarmadam, and outflanked the Tiger defenders from within the NFZ. Meanwhile, 17 GW, under 58 Division, linked up with troops of 10 GR under Maj. Janaka Udowita.

While 53 Division were advancing along the lagoon, parallel to them, 58 Division advanced along the coast. From north of the Tiger occupied thin strip of five sq. km., two other battle groups too, began advancing. Task Force VIII under Col. G.V. Ravipriya, 68-2 Brigade under Col. Lalantha Gamage, moving along A35 and giving rear support, and 68-2 Brigade, under Lt. Col. Subashana Welikala, advancing from Nandikadal lagoon side covering the entire area, where the remaining Tiger leaders are holed up.

Naval cordon tightens

Meanwhile, after troops contained Tigers to the 5 sq. km area, the Navy, to fence them into a 5 sq. km coastal stretch from Mulaitivu to Vellaimullaivaikal, has deployed four security rings with attack vessels. Last week, Vice Admiral Wasantha Karrannagoda had been advised by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, to completely seal this narrow coastal strip, using all resources available to the Navy. The Dvora's stationed in the deep seas, were moved up by about 10 km. And the smaller attack craft were moved up to within five kms. of the shore. Patrolling the shallow seas is done by smaller craft. The Special Boat Squadron under Commander Devaka Chadrakeerthi, Rapid Deployment Boat Squadron under Lt. Commander Nalinda Jayasinghe, and the Fast Attack Boat Squadron under Capt. S.C. Kalubowila, have been deployed in the security rings.

The 57-2 Brigade under Col. Senarath Bandara, coming under 57 Division Commanded by Maj. Gen. Jagath Dias, discovered a large stock of Tiger Arms in the West of Pudukudyirippu in the Pottiaru area.

Arms haul

The 18 VR under Maj. Laksiri Perera, found 19 suicide kits, eight 25 kgs Claymore bombs, three 4 kgs Claymore bombs, 2 bombs sealed with fiberglass each 25 kgs, 10 suicide kits minus explosives, 210 switches used in suicide kits and, for the first time, a suicide motorcycle helmet laden with 4 kgs of explosives. Along with these were maps of Hambantota, Matara, Dehiwela, and Mt. Lavinia, these may have been intended for attacks in the South.

The 9 Armoured Corp under this Brigade and led by Maj. Ravi Pathiravithana, discovered 21 boat engines, 1,247 Tiger bombs, 22 Claymore bombs, 55 booby traps and other material. In the meantime, 55 Division discovered a large high speed suicide boat in the Putumattalan area, packed with 2,000 kgs. of explosives, readied for a suicide attack. The intended target may have been the Jet Liner troop transport ship.



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