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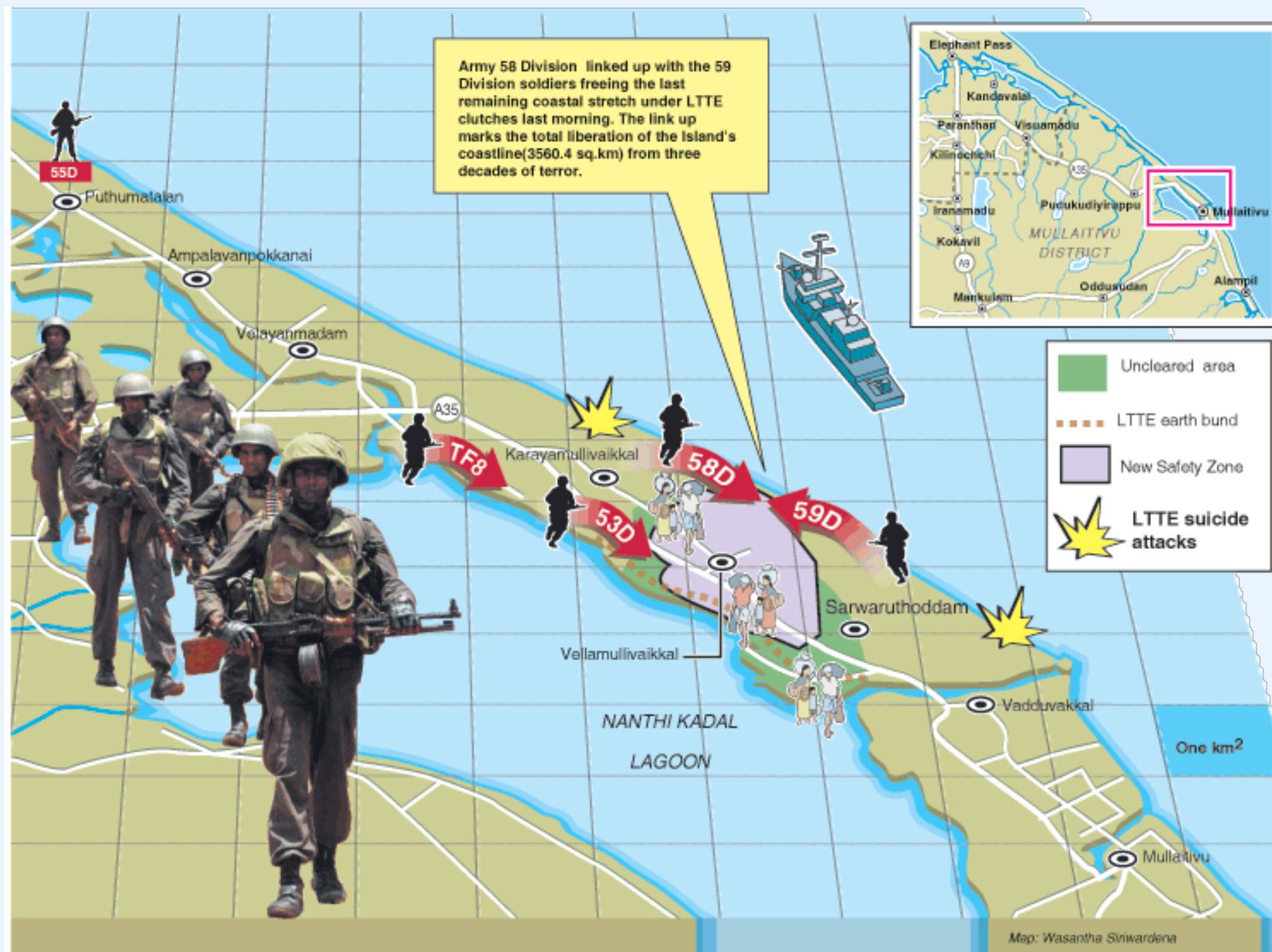
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SECURITY FORCES POISED FOR VICTORY

By Tissa Ravindra Perera

It became clear by Friday that, it was only a matter of time, before the decisive final Wannu battle would be over.

Despite being on an official visit to China, Army Chief Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka, at frequent intervals, took time off his tight schedule, to monitor the latest developments on the battlefield, while issuing necessary instructions to ensure success of all ongoing operations. In fact, the entire humanitarian operation was making headway under his direct supervision.

The capture of the Tigers' highly fortified defense line ringing the Nandikadal lagoon, that separated Vadduwakkal and Mullaitivu from the 'No Fire' Zone (NFZ), by 59 Division under Brig. Prasanna de Silva and backed by Special Forces, saw a total of 3,309 IDPs leaving the NFZ.

Meanwhile, the 11th Infantry Regiment (SLLI) under 58 Division led by Brig. Shavendra Silva, had, by Friday (15), marched about 600 metres ahead, taking the shoreline where the ship Farah was found. Troops of Gemunu Watch (GW) and Vijayaba Regiment were, meanwhile, forging ahead in a parallel movement, to close in on the enemy for the final assault.

By Friday, troops of 58 the and 59 Divisions found that, they had only another kilometre stretch of the Mullaitivu coastline to completely seal Tiger access to the area by sea.

The Tigers' loss of sway over the coastal belt, also saw them being cornered into a small rectangular area in the Vellamullivaikkal NFZ.

While these operations were on, troops of 53 Division were fast advancing, liberating many civilians in their stride. One of the objectives of 53 Division's operation was to liberate hundreds of civilians held captive by the LTTE in this area, and to enable them flee towards Nandikadal lagoon situated west of A 35 road.

Closing in on the enemy from other fronts also were troops from 6 Gajaba Regiment (GR), 1 GR, and 5 GW.

By Friday afternoon, Tiger leaders confined to a three square kilometre area in the NFZ, were compelled to hole up in underground bunkers and hideouts. This marked a massive exodus of trapped civilians from the NFZ into the safety of the troops.

Aerial pictures taken by Air Force surveillance craft showed a sea of heads moving towards the troops dug in around the NFZ. The civilians had been so determined to make their getaway that, they had defied the indiscriminate firing by Tiger cadres, aimed at stopping this mass flight to freedom.

Army Intelligence, meanwhile, received reports that, the desperate Tiger leaders, 'supremo' Prabhakaran, Pottu Amman and Susai while holed up in the NFZ, had held secret council to take a hard decision on their last ditch stand. Intercepts of Tiger tele-messages revealed that the Tiger hierarchy had issued instructions to destroy Tiger intelligence documents and to blow up their arsenals.

On May 14, two loud explosions were heard from the area where the Tigers were holed up and a series of explosions from the same area were heard the following day too.

A total of 2,849 civilians had sought refuge from 58 Division and 324 from 59 Division, on May 13. Military Intelligence had identified 262 as hardcore Tigers, from among the 3,309 civilians surrendered to 59 Division the previous day.

It was later confirmed that, there were over 60 Tiger cadres among those who surrendered to 58 Division. Meanwhile, three Black Tiger women who had mingled with the fleeing IDPs, had given up their mission and surrendered to the Army.

The Navy captured a boat on the high seas off Mullaitivu with the wife, daughter and son of Tiger leader Soosai, and several others on board.

Among the others on the boat were Soosai's brother's wife, her son and some family members of LTTE Intelligence Unit member Suda.

These fugitives are now being interrogated by Navy officials.

The Navy had, by this time, thrown up a security ring covering the sea off Mullaitivu, while the infantry Units had reduced the Tiger presence along the Mullaitivu coast to a kilometre'

Loudest explosion

It was on May 12, that the three Army Divisions began the final thrust on the Tiger leaders and their badly battered and demoralised cadres reduced to a few hundreds, now cornered into a small piece of territory.

The 58 Division and the 53 Division under Maj. Gen. Kamal Gunaratne, had advanced to Vellamullawaikkal, north of the NFZ. By May 11, these two Units had entered the NFZ. Meanwhile, troops of 59 Division, having crossed the mouth of the Nandikadal lagoon in Mullaitivu, advanced into Tiger-held territory, smashing their Forward Defense Line (FDL). (Separate story on this operation will appear)

45 Tiger bodies

During the following clearing operations, bodies of 45 Tiger cadres and a large haul of arms and ammunition were found.

On May 12, the Tigers blew up six houses stacked with explosives, by remote control, as troops of 58 Division were tactically advancing through open terrain.

The 58 Division made further inroads into the Tiger territory reinforced by 58-1 Brigade under Lt. Col. Deshapriya Gunawardena, 58-2 Brigade under Lt. Col. Sanjaya Wanigasinghe, and 58-3 Brigade under Lt. Col. Ramesh Fernando. Deputy Commander of 58 Division Col. Suraj, was among the military leaders who successfully led the infantrymen.

Multi barrel weapons recovered

During operations conducted by 9 and 12 GW, under Lt. Col. Lionel Chandrasiri, and 11 SLLI, under Col. Kithsiri Ekanayake, on May 12, recovered 30 Tiger bodies and a large number of firearms.

During fierce fighting, 9 GW had recovered two multi-barrel rocket launchers. Single-barrel and multi-barrel weapons and motors were among the other weapons recovered. This was the first time a multi-barrel weapon was found, since the Thoppigala battle, and the Tigers had used this weapon continuously, to stop the advancing forces.

Meanwhile, troops of 58 Division under Maj. Kumar Peiris, discovered a Tiger graveyard, where over 1,000 Tigers lie buried. They also found a high speed water scooter used by the Sea Tigers. The 53 Division advanced west of the A 35 road. This division had liberated over 160 civilians on May 14. Several infantry units belonging to the airborne fighter brigade commanded by Lt. Col. Tilak Hangilipola, supported by Col. G.V. Ravipriya, marched ahead of the troops of 53 Division.

The 5 VR under Lt. Col. Kalpa Sanjeewa, 6 GR, 5 GW and 1 GR under Lt. Col. Mohan Ratnayake, also reinforced this flank.

Meanwhile, 68-2 Brigade under Lt. Col. Subhash Wekikala, belonging to Task Force VIII, had thrown up a security ring around the Nandikadal lagoon, to prevent possible flight by Tiger leaders through the lagoon.

GR troops of 53 Division, during their operations, captured two anti-aircraft (pedal) guns mounted on cabs.

Aircraft parts recovered

Troops recovered parts of aircraft of the Tiger Air Wing, along with some accessories, at Thevapuram on May 13. This vital discovery was made by troops of the 2nd Artillery Unit under Lt. Col. Pradeep Perera. This Unit is functioning under the 57-2 Brigade of 57 Division under Maj. Gen. Jagath Dias. The 5-72 Brigade is commanded by Lt. Col. Senarath Bandara and his second in command is Col. Mahinda Weerasuriya .

An engine with rotating blades manufactured in Germany, Four-cylinder engines and signalling equipment were among the other equipment found. A cassette containing footage of landmark events of the Tiger Air Wing's history, was among other finds. Some parts of aircraft had been imported from USA and Canada.

Among the documents found was the Tiger plan of their last air raid on Colombo and Katunayake. There was also a map showing the Hingurakgoda Air Force camp. An interesting scene from the video tape recovered, is the one showing Prabhakaran unsuccessfully trying to light the traditional oil lamp five times, to inaugurate the Tiger Air Wing, as if that served as a bad omen.

