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Advantage Army Tigers outmanoeuvred in north

The primary focus is usually on the fluctuating military fortunes of those engaged in armed confrontation. The unfolding humanitarian tragedy of mass-scale displacement is forgotten. It is estimated that about 250,000 to 300,000 civilians live in LTTE-controlled territory in the north. Around 120,000 people have been displaced in the past year of fighting. More than 50,000 were displaced in the month of July alone. Given the fact that there is another segment of people displaced through earlier wars and by the tsunami, the total number of IDPs in the Wanni at present is estimated at 170,000 to 175,000

Medical personnel travelling last week from government-controlled Vavuniya to the hospital in Tiger-controlled Puliyanakulam were surprised to find the town deserted and hospital closed.

It was then that they came to know of the latest orders issued by the LTTE to the helpless civilian population under their control in the northern mainland known as the Wanni.

All civilians living between Puliyanakulam and Kanakarayanakulam along the Jaffna-Kandy Road, known as the A9 Highway, had been instructed by the LTTE to leave their dwellings and relocate to areas between Oddusuddan and Puthukudiyiruppu in the Mullaitivu District.

Civilians living between government-controlled Omanthai and Puliyanakulam along the A9 Highway had been ordered to leave some months ago when hostilities escalated in the Vavuniya north region. Now people living further up on the A8 had also been ordered to evacuate.

Civilian displacement

People living between Kanakarayanakulam and Mankulam were told by the Tigers to be prepared to move out from their homes at very short notice. Fearing the worst, many people living in and around Mankulam had voluntarily commenced moving last week.

This latest civilian displacement was mainly due to rapid advances made by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the north. It was a case of 'Advantage Army' as a militarily outmanoeuvred LTTE began withdrawing from entrenched positions. As far as the trapped civilians were concerned, there was no possibility of their defying the LTTE diktat 'en masse' and so would have pathetically obeyed.

Nevertheless, it would have been obvious to most civilians that the LTTE orders were a manifestation of weakness and not an indicator of strength. The Tigers were forcing people to move out because they knew they could not hold the army at bay.

Protracted fighting in areas to the west of the A9 in the Vavuniya and Mannar Districts had seen the LTTE fighting fiercely to retain their positions. Yet the past months witnessed the armed forces gaining the upper hand in a slow but relentless push for military supremacy against the LTTE.

Notwithstanding their dogged determination, the tenacious Tigers were no match for the armed forces and their superior manpower, firepower, armour power and airpower.

This superiority, however, should not detract from the fact that the armed forces have also displayed high morale and vigorous determination in persisting with their military objectives.

Military action in the northern mainland began in earnest in July last year. At that time the Forward Defence Lines (FDLs) of the armed forces in Mannar and Vavuniya Districts were along the Vavuniya-Parayanalankulam Road, known as A30 and the Medawachchiya-Mannar Road, known as A14.

Moreover, some Army positions were sandwiched between LTTE controlled areas in the south and north of Mannar District.

Army advance

Currently the armed forces in Mannar and Vavuniya have advanced at least 60 to 65 kilometres to the north of their



Though military positions are constantly fluctuating, present estimates show that the armed forces control more than 90% of Mannar District, 60% of Vavuniya District and about 15% of Mullaitivu District.

The initial breakthrough came on September 2, 2007, when the armed forces in a three-pronged operation took over the entire Musali AGA Division, south of the Aruvi Aaru in Mannar.

Thereafter, the short-term objectives were Marudhamadhu, known as Madhu, and Adampan. The Tigers proffered stiff resistance and fought back ferociously. There was heavy fighting around Giant's Tank, known as Kattukkaraiikulam in Tamil and Yodha Ella in Sinhala.

The fall of Madhu became inevitable when the armed forces took Periyathambanai, Sinna and Periya Pandivirichaan, etc., and moved on three sides within two kilometres of the sacred Catholic Church dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary. The LTTE vacated the area and the armed forces moved into Madhu on April 15, this year. Two weeks later the armed forces took over the Giant's Tank and its environs in their entirety.

May 9 saw Adampan fall. Thereafter, it was a series of successes for the armed forces as the Tigers began vacating their positions in key areas like Palampitty, Periyamadhu, Nedunkandal, etc.

The first week of July saw the armed forces gain full control of about 120 square miles of paddy fields in the hinterland of Mannar. This region was known as the 'Rice Bowl of Mannar.'

Now the stage was set a military campaign to gain full control of the key Mannar-Pooneryn Road, known as the A32 Highway.

Long-term objectives

The two long-term objectives of the Army were to destroy the Sea Tiger bases in the coastal areas of Vidathaltheevu and Nachikudah and to establish full control of the littoral along Mannar-Pooneryn Road.

If and when the armed forces managed to eradicate LTTE sea power off the shores of Mannar District and take over the Mannar-Pooneryn Road and littoral areas, several advantages would be gained.

Firstly, the maritime supply route from Tamil Nadu could be restricted, if not stopped altogether. Presently the LTTE gets most of its fuel, medicine, dry ration food and materials like metal for explosive devices, etc., from India.

Secondly, it would be possible to establish a land-based route to Jaffna peninsula. Transport could be along the Mannar-Pooneryn Road and from there by the short-distance ferry between Sangupiddy and Keratheevu.

Thirdly, government writ over the Mannar littoral would facilitate offshore exploration for oil in the Mannar Gulf basin.

Fourthly, taking control of Pooneryn can eliminate the threat to Jaffna peninsula from the LTTE artillery battery located in the Kalmunai-Nagathevanthurai areas of Pooneryn. The Tigers are able to target even the Palaly base from Pooneryn.

Fifthly, the armed forces can use Pooneryn as a launching pad for further ground movements into Tiger territory. If troops move east and reach Paranthan, they have three further options.

- 1: Move further east by south-east along the axis of Paranthan-Mullaitivu Road;
- 2: Move up north towards Elephant Pass;
- 3: Move down south towards Kilinochchi.

It is against the backdrop of these strategic objectives that the march on Vidathaltheevu gathered momentum. The Vidathaltheevu promontory was about two kilometres away from the Pallamadu junction on the A32.

Vidathal is a thorny scrub (mimosa cinerea) found in many areas of the north east. Vidathaltheevu means Island of Vidathal in Tamil.

The Naayaaru River cutting across Naayaatraveli reaches the sea near Vidathaltheevu. The sea water level off Vidathaltheevu rises and falls with the tide. The boats berthed in the water at dawn could lie in the sand at dusk. This ebbing sea is called "Vatrupekkukadal" in Tamil.

Vidathaltheevu has a natural harbour but marine access from the Gulf of Mannar was made possible only through the construction of the Arnolda Canal in the 40s of the last century.

Approach to Vidathaltheevu

In recent times, Vidathaltheevu had become the major Sea Tiger base along the north-western coast.

The Tigers had set up an eight kilometre long defence line stretching from the banks of Naayaaru via Naayaatraveli to Piraamanaalankulam. This LTTE line was a difficult obstacle to surmount and it appeared that the armed forces could be bogged down for quite a while.

It was at this juncture that the armed forces adopted a refreshingly new approach. Instead of relying on their overwhelming military superiority alone, the armed forces began displaying superior military tactics. This remarkable change began paying dividends.

Troops moved clandestinely through jungle areas in a northward direction from points in Palampitty and Periyamadhu, both situated along the Iranai Iluppaikulam-Pallamadu Road.

They succeeded in reaching Sirattykulam on the border of Thunukkai AGA Division. Though located in the north-western sector, Thunukkai forms part of the Mullaitivu District.

After reaching Sirattykulam, the troops changed direction and moved westwards from the east. They reached a comparatively unknown yet key location called Koorai.

Koorai was an irrigation settlement begun in the '80s of the 20th Century. The work was not completed and the anicut construction of Koorai Tank was abandoned.

Only some Irrigation Department buildings and around 40 to 50 families remain to tell the tale of what could have been a flourishing settlement.

Once the armed forces reached Koorai, they used it as a launching pad to mount two forward movements further to the west towards the A32 or Mannar-Pooneryn Road.

One column moved through Aathimottai and interdicted the A32 at Kalliaddy. The other column moved along Koyilkulam and Puthukulam and breached the A32 at Pallivaasalpitty. A third column broke out from Periyamadhu and reached Pallamadu junction. This tripartite thrust saw the LTTE being checkmated.



The Tigers had no choice other than to withdraw from Vidathaltheevu by sea; this they did, and when the armed forces moved in, neither Tigers nor their boats were there. The next big town along the A32 was Iluppaikkadavai, where the LTTE had a large base, housing elements of the Charles Anthony Regiment. The Tigers began withdrawing from Iluppaikkadavai at the same time they were moving out of Vidathaltheevu.

Thus, the armed forces continued their victorious thrust further north along the A32 and took Iluppaikkadavai also. Thereafter, they advanced further up and crossed the Parangi Aaru River. By the last week of July, the armed forces had taken Moondrampitty along the Mannar-Pooneryn Road. The last big town on the A32 that falls under Mannar District is Vellankulam. Thereafter it is Kilinochchi District, where the first big town is Mulangaavil. The Paali Aaru River reaches the sea near Vellankulam.

It appears that the LTTE is getting ready for the long haul at Paali Aaru-Vellankulam. Bunkers and trenches are being constructed and fortified. The Army is now getting ready to confront the LTTE at Vellankulam. Artillery shelling and aerial bombardment on Vellankulam has begun. This resulted in an interesting development. When the armed forces began closing in on Madhu during April, the Catholic clergy hierarchy in Mannar had taken away the sacred statue of Our Lady of Madhu to another place for safety. This relocation of the blessed Mary statue was facilitated by the LTTE.

The statue was housed temporarily at the St. Xavier's Church at Thevayanpitty, popularly known as Thevanpitty. Thevanpitty is situated on a small road leading to the coast from Vellankulam. With Vellankulam being targeted and shells falling on Thevanpitty, the sacred statue became vulnerable. So the 'displaced' statue was brought back to the Bishop's House in Mannar town.

Madhu Shrine

Last Tuesday, Wanni Security Forces Commander Major General Jagath Dias officially invited Mannar Bishop, Most Rev. Rayappu Joseph to take over the Madhu Shrine, which had been repaired under the supervision of the Army. The Holy Statue is likely to be enshrined in the Church again within the next few days in order to have the annual feast in mid-August with the participation of Catholic devotees from all four corners of the country.

Meanwhile, there is an impression in the south that all sea movement along the north western coast has been stopped for the LTTE after the fall of Vidathaltheevu. This is not correct. While the loss of Vidathaltheevu would be keenly felt by the Tigers, sea movement along the north western coast has certainly not been circumscribed. There are coastal points like Nachikudah, Pallikudaah, Valapaadu and Peimunai along the Kilinochchi District coast that are being utilised by the LTTE.

Increased Sea Tiger movement in the seas between Talaimannar and Neduntheevu (Delft) in recent times indicate that LTTE marine movement is undergoing a sea change. Since the LTTE needs north western sea access to maintain contact with the Indian coast, the Tigers would most probably resist Army advances further along the A32 fiercely.

While the bulk of LTTE sea supply is on the east coast between Challai and Alampil, India remains a chief source of supply of fuel, medicine, dry rations and metal for the LTTE. Thus, it is of paramount importance that the LTTE preserves and protects at least part of the 77 kilometre long Mannar-Pooneryn Road. Currently about half the A32 Highway is under government control. Against this backdrop the Tigers will try and make a last ditch stand at Vellankulam-Paali Aaru to prevent further advances of the Army along the north western coast into Kilinochchi District.

Battle for Vellankulam

There is also another reason for the LTTE to fight it out ferociously at Vellankulam. This is because of a road from Vellankulam that leads to Mankulam along the Kandy-Jaffna Road or A9 Highway. Situated along this road are the important and relatively thickly populated towns of Thunukkaai and Mallavi. Holding off the Army at Vellankulam could deter the armed forces from gaining control of one end of this minor yet geo-strategically vital road.

Even if the LTTE is able to contain the Army at Vellankulam, the threat to Mallavi and Thunukkai is by no means diminished. This is because the armed forces have made significant strides on other related fronts. In a limited replay of the Vidathaltheevu campaign, the armed forces out manoeuvred the LTTE by getting off the beaten track and striking unexpectedly behind enemy lines. Forces stationed to the north of Nattaankandal proceeded towards Thunukkaai through a place called Ottankulam.

The last week of July saw the Army engaged in combat with the LTTE at Kalvilaankulam about three kilometres away from Thunukkaai. Likewise, forces stationed near Panankaamam, in a surprise move, proceeded through Paandiyankulam and reached the south of Vavunikulam. Panankaamam, which is about seven kilometres away from Vavunikulam, was the fiefdom ruled by the Wanni chieftain Pandara Vannian, or Wanni Bandara, who defied the British at the historic battle of Katsilaimadhu.

The latter part of July saw the armed forces and Tigers embroiled in intense conflict around the Vavunikulam tank and its bunds. If the armed forces are able to move via the tank bund area to Paalaipaani or Kidaaipidithakulam, then it would be possible to interdict the LTTE supply route along Vannivilaankulam-Moondrumurippu. This in turn would affect Tiger logistics drastically on the one hand while enhancing modes of supply for the Army among various points in that sector.

Intense fighting

Currently there is intense fighting in Vavuniya north areas like Navvy, Palamottai, Vilakkuvaitakulam, etc. Supplies to the LTTE are brought along the Vannivilaankulam-Moondrumurippu Road to sustain cadres fighting on the

and Mankulam.

In addition, the fall of Vavunikulam would also result in the armed forces being only about four to five kilometres away from Mallavi. Thus, it would be possible to reach Mankulam via Mallavi if Vavunikulam falls.

If the fighting in Vavunikulam, Thunukkai and Mallavi proves successful (as is most likely), the armed forces would most likely reach the A9 and take key spots like Mankulam, Puliyanakulam, Kanakarayankulam, etc.

Though the LTTE is trying to put up a massive defence at Vellankulam on the A32, the armed forces could do a "Vidathaltheevu" and outmanoeuvre the Tigers.

The forces could proceed north after taking Thunukkai and encircle Vellankulam without trying to break the defences to its south similar to that of the Vidathaltheevu operation.

The LTTE decision to move civilians along the A9 further into the interior demonstrates that the Tigers are not confident of preventing further advances by the Army.

The series of successes by the armed forces suggest that the fall of Vavunikulam, Mallavi, Thunukkai, etc., are imminent. This would lead to the Army entering the A9 area.

In such an eventuality, it is only a matter of time before the A9 Highway from Vavuniya to Kilinochchi is under Army control.

If the armed forces take the Mannar-Pooneryn Road and then move east to Paranthan, the LTTE at Elephant Pass would be beleaguered. In that case the Tigers may have to vacate Elephant Pass or be caught like an arecanut in a nutcracker.

If all these things happen, the armed forces could accomplish the rare feat of regaining the A9 Highway from LTTE clutches.

It would be difficult to specify an accurate timetable but there is the imperative of weather.

Once the monsoon rains commence in October, conditions would be difficult for military movement. All rivers will be in spate and floods could occur. Therefore, the tentative deadline for full control of the A9 Highway and areas to its west could be the ides of October.

Flipside

Thereafter, the fighting could rage in the areas to the east of the A9. The LTTE, it must be said, is down but certainly not out. There is also the suspicion that the Tigers could launch a counter-strike against the rapidly advancing Army.

The flipside to the military advantage gained is increased vulnerability. With the Army spreading thin, it could be the target of Tigers moving in clandestinely through jungle routes.

The creditable performance of the Army in the fighting in the north western sector is due to the 58 and 57 Divisions and Task Force Two.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa flew to the frontlines of Mannar and Vavuniya on July 31 to meet the ground and field commanders of all three outfits. He congratulated those responsible for their praiseworthy performance.

The Defence Secretary also touched on an aspect of the conflict that is often ignored, overlooked or underemphasised. This is the predicament of civilians displaced by the fighting.

The primary focus is usually on the fluctuating military fortunes of those engaged in armed confrontation. The unfolding humanitarian tragedy of mass-scale displacement is forgotten.

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa drew the attention of military top brass to displaced civilian plight. He urged that every assistance be rendered to these hapless people to reach the comparative safety of government-controlled territory.

It is estimated that about 250,000 to 300,000 civilians live in LTTE-controlled territory in the north. Around 120,000 people have been displaced in the past year of fighting. More than 50,000 were displaced in the month of July alone. Given the fact that there is another segment of people displaced through earlier wars and by the tsunami, the total number of IDPs in the Wannai at present is estimated at 170,000 to 175,000.

Most of the recently displaced were those living in areas regarded as 'secure' for many years. Places like Vellankulam, Iluppaikkadavai, Thunukkai, Vavunikulam, Mallavi, Mankulam, etc., have been places housing thousands of previously displaced persons. Now all are affected and dispersing.

Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) personnel with working experience in the Wannai opine that large numbers of the people there would like to relocate to the relatively safer and comfortable areas under government control. The steady trickle of people braving LTTE wrath and crossing over clandestinely by boat to Mannar Island indicates the desperate mood of the civilian population.

But the LTTE seems adamant in preventing such an outflow. The recent orders given to the people along A9 suggest that the LTTE would not want civilians to move into government areas.

Ever present danger

Instead, they want these people to move further into the interior of LTTE-controlled areas. Apart from the lack of proper facilities and inadequacy of the authorities to cater to the needs of these IDPs, there is ever present danger.

Aerial bombardment and artillery shelling makes these people extremely vulnerable to physical danger. Harsh policies adopted by the government in the name of security have limited the scale and scope of external assistance by NGOs.

The local administrative machinery is hopelessly ill-equipped to handle the ever-increasing numbers of the internally displaced. The only humanitarian way out for these people is to let them relocate to government-controlled areas.

If and when that happens, the NGOs with their ample resources could move in and attend to the influx of IDPs. This is what happened in Batticaloa when more than 200,000 were displaced.

The LTTE backed Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) has begun a fundraising drive in the west for Mannar-Vavuniya IDPs. It is a moot point as to whether the TRO could utilise these funds without delay for those affected as

delay?

The easy way out would be for the LTTE to relax its controls and allow 'exit' to those who want to move out to government areas.

The total lack of care and concern showed by this government to those civilians living in the arena of war is indeed something which deserves severe condemnation. Likewise, the callous conduct of the LTTE towards displaced Tamil civilians is also reprehensible.

IDPs are entitled to the right of movement. They should be allowed to move to areas of safety if they want to do so.



While the government heaps terrible consequences on civilians in the name of security, the LTTE adds to their woes in the name of liberation. The IDPs are caught in the middle.

The UNHCR drafted Guiding Principles regarding IDPs emphasise that the displaced be allowed freedom of movement. Principles 14 and 15 are particularly explicit on this aspect.

The TRO very rightly points out that the government is restricting access to IDPs, thereby violating the letter and spirit of the UNHCR principles. By the same token, the LTTE is also violating the spirit and letter of UNHCR principles by restricting movement of IDPs. The TRO, being exclusively focused on Tamil IDPs, should persuade the LTTE to revise its stance and allow Wannai civilians the same freedom of movement that was allowed the IDPs of Paduvaankarai in Batticaloa.

“Let my people go”

“Let my people go,” according to the Book of Exodus in The Bible, was the poignant request made by Moses to the Egyptian Pharaoh. That was a demand made to a despotic, alien ruler by the representative of an oppressed people.

Today the same cry, “Let my people go,” can be articulated on behalf of the Wannai IDPs to the LTTE hierarchy. Sadly, the LTTE and the Wannai civilians are all of the same ethnicity.

Ironically, the LTTE claims to be fighting for the Tamil cause. This then is the difference illustrating the tragedy of the Tamils.

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