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## Army breaks through Tiger defences in three key areas

On August 27, the soldiers overran Aalankulam and by evening had linked up together the three geographically separate places of Thunukkaai, Uyilankulam and Aalankulam. With territorial non-contiguity removed, all three places are being amalgamated into a massive defence complex. This act of linking and amalgamating captured areas by the Army shows that it is quite wary of the Tigers infiltrating through gaps. Besides, this manner of expanding control could help establish a viable and vibrant military presence in captured areas

More than 8,000 persons have been detained by the LTTE at various times in Thunukkaai, of whom only a small number are among the living today. If an intensive search is conducted in the vicinity, the probability of mass graves being unearthed would be very high. Once again, Tiger inhumanity to fellow Tamils would be spotlighted

The prize target at present is Kilinochchi town, the administrative capital of the LTTE. Given its overwhelming superiority over the Tigers in manpower, firepower and armoured mobility and the manner in which it has outmanoeuvred the LTTE, it is a case of 'Advantage Army' in the Wanni right now

The Sri Lankan armed forces, fighting on multiple fronts, made three significant breakthroughs on Wednesday, August 27, and Thursday, August 28, in the key areas of Aalankulam, Palamottai and Ulaathuveli.

These breakthroughs came in the wake of earlier successes over the past two weeks, where the armed forces took places like Mulangaavil, Uyilankulam, Kalivilaan, Thunukkaai and the southern and south western environs of Thannimurippukulam.

From a military-strategic perspective, the 'prize' of great value was the key area of Vavuniya North, consisting of places



defences had been set up to the west of the A9 Highway on the southern side of the Paali Aaru in a region that was roughly south west of Puliyankulam and north west of Omanthai. Both Puliyankulam and Omanthai are situated along the Jaffna-Kandy Road known as the A9. The Paali Aaru River originates in the Omanthai-Puliyankulam region and flows through Vavunikulam, where it is dammed. The residual waters reach the sea at Vellankulam in the Mannar District.



As stated in these columns earlier, the Paali Aaru River has assumed geo-strategic importance in the ongoing fighting between the armed forces and Tigers, with many of the confrontations taking place along the river basin area.

### Theatre of conflict

While the battles waged in Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu Districts capture the public imagination, the prolonged fighting in the Vavuniya North sector has not received the publicity it deserves.

A virtual 'arc' to the south of Paali Aaru, extending from Sinnvalayankattu in the west to Vilakkuvaithakulam in the east, has been the theatre of conflict in these parts of Vavuniya North.

It is simply referred to as the Palamottai front in military parlance because that village has been the sheet anchor of Tiger defences.

There was a time in the '80s of the last century when Palamottai was in the news due to the antics of a prominent PLOTE leader from the village called "Palamottai" Sivan. Those were the days when the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) ruled the roost in Vavuniya District.

Nowadays Palamottai's claim to fame is based on its militaristic utility. There had been much fighting from last year onwards in this front, but the LTTE had resisted military advances defiantly. The first breakthrough in this battle zone was achieved on May 23 when the 57 Division commanded by Major General Jagath Dias took part of Moondrumurippu, to the north west of Palamottai. Thereafter, fighting continued with vigour but the LTTE defences were impregnable.

Meanwhile, there were tactical changes by the armed forces. The 57 Division began shifting focus towards the Thunukkai and Maanhai east Assistant Government Agent divisions of Mullaitivu District. Both these are situated to the west of the A9.

With the 57 changing its goal, a new player entered the battlefield. The recently raised Task Force - 2 was moved to the Palamottai front. Task Force - 2 had its baptism of fire in the Manal Aaru/Weli Oya region. Later it was deployed in the Mannar-Vavuniya border areas. It was then stationed along the Palamottai front and entrusted the key task of breaking through Tiger defences there.

Task Force - 2 faced up to this formidable challenge from July 1 onwards. Thereafter, intensive and protracted fighting commenced almost on a daily basis. A significant breakthrough came on July 11 when troops of the 57 Division and Task Force - 2, in a coordinated operation, smashed Tiger defences.

While the 57 Division took Nattaankandal the Task Force - 2 took some areas of Navvi. Despite this, fighting continued in the general area of Navvi-Palamottai. The soldiers and guerrillas fought fiercely with offensives, counter-offensives and commando type raids being conducted frequently. There was also aerial bombardment and artillery shelling. There were reports almost on a daily basis about military movement along this front and casualty figures. Yet, there was little forward movement in terms of capturing fresh territory.

Thus, these matters became almost a matter of routine and the battles along the Palamottai front turned gradually into a 'forgotten' war. The strategic value of this fighting was not appreciated by the general public.

### Palamottai front

The LTTE, which realised fully well the importance of the Palamottai front, paid much attention to it, with its Vavuniya District Commander Lt. Col Velavan personally overseeing defences.

Later the Tigers supplemented these cadres with a contingent led by "Col." Lawrence. These cadres were re-deployed from the Muhamaalai front in the Jaffna peninsula. Lawrence is a battle-hardened senior leader who has demonstrated his prowess in many battles in the northern mainland and peninsula.

Lawrence's induction raised the stakes at Palamottai but the fighting went on and gradually the armed forces began gaining the upper hand.

The ultimate breakthrough came shortly after dawn on August 28. The previous day had seen a massive escalation in fighting with a number of casualties on both sides.

On August 28, an intensive artillery barrage preceded the ground based assault. Thereafter, units of the Mechanised Infantry Division (MID), along with regular troops, broke out from three points and launched a three-pronged, ground-based drive along Kunchukulam-Palamottai-Navatkulam.

After intense fighting, including combat at close quarters, the armed forces shattered Tiger defences at two points and began advancing on the right and left flanks of Palamottai.

The Tigers had no choice other than to retreat and by noon Palamottai had fallen. Task Force - 2, led by Brigadier Rohana Bandara, had seized the long-awaited prize.

The Tigers, however, have forded the Paali Aaru and are setting up new defences on the northern side of the river.



Palamottai and Navatkulam in the night. Troops retaliated swiftly and repulsed the attacks.

### Counterattacks

It remains to be seen whether the LTTE can organise swift counterattacks to dislodge the soldiers before they can entrench themselves. It is also moot as to whether the Tiger defences beyond Paali Aaru can hold off the armed forces for long.

Earlier LTTE defences at Palamottai were sustained through a makeshift supply route along the Vannivilaankulam-Moondrumurippu Road. From Moondrumurippu, another link road was used to reach Palamottai. After Moondrumurippu was taken, the LTTE veered off the road at a vantage point and cut across a jungle track to reach Palamottai.

This column opined earlier that the 57 Division fighting in the Vavunikulam-Mallavi-Thunukkaai region would be able to interdict supplies to the LTTE Palamottai front either by crossing the Vavunikulam reservoir and seizing Paalaipaani or by advancing up to Vannivilaankulam itself.

This column felt that crippling the LTTE on the Palamottai front was possible only if the Vannivilaankulam-Moondrumurippu-Palamottai supply route was severed. But to its credit Task Force – 2 seems to have gone ahead and taken Palamottai before the 57 Division could interdict the supply route.

It is hard to fathom whether the LTTE would effectively maintain defences to the north of Paali Aaru in Vavuniya North or withdraw after some fighting. But if the Tigers want to resist for long, regular supplies are essential. For this the LTTE has to use the Moondrumurippu route for some distance and then seek out jungle tracks for an alternative route.

Given the proximity of the 57 Division in the Mallavi area and possible expansion of its presence, it is only a matter of time before Vannivilaankulam falls. Thus, the Tigers have to seek out another alternative. It may now have to provide supplies through the A9 Highway – something which the LTTE has avoided as far as possible earlier. The LTTE had thrown in a lot of forces to defend the Palamottai front due to its importance. Therefore, it has to try hard and resist further advances by the Army consequent to the fall of Palamottai.

### Immediate priority

As for the armed forces, the immediate priority would be to link up with the A9 Highway as soon as possible. A minor road from Palamottai area cuts into the A9 at a point between Puliyanakulam and Omanthai. The Army is in control of the road stretch between Vavuniya to Omanthai along the A9 at present. The 56 Division is in charge of defences along this road and environs now.

If and when the armed forces do link up with the A9 north of Omanthai, they would have established an intricate road network connecting the A32 or Mannar-Pooneryn Road along the north western coast to the A9 in central Wannai. These interlinked roads would begin at Pallamadu junction on the A32 and end up near Omanthai on the A9, with places like Periyamadhu, Palampitty, Iranaiiluppaikulam, Moondrumurippu and Palamottai being en route.

This would enable the armed forces to exercise effective control over extensive tracts of land in a quadrangle boxed on four sides by four roadways: To the south would be the Mannar-Vavuniya Road; to the west the Mannar-Pooneryn Road; to the east the Jaffna-Kandy Road and to the north the A32 to A9 road link.

The breakthrough at Palamottai would also strengthen the offensive and defensive capabilities of the armed forces in the Wannai.

Once Palamottai areas are consolidated and the A9 is linked up, it does not require much grey matter to predict that the Army would rapidly advance along the axis of the A9 Highway.

Puliyanakulam, Kanakarayanakulam and then Mankulam would be the 'target stops' along the A9 during this phase of the military campaign. If and when Mankulam is reached, the 57 Division currently holding much of the Vellankulam-Mankulam Road would be able to link up on the A9.

Thereafter, troops could go further north along the A9 axis towards Kilinochchi and/or proceed eastwards on the Mankulam-Mullaitivu Road.

The possible takeover of Puliyanakulam by the armed forces could also enhance offensive capability. The forces could use the Puliyanakulam-Mullaitivu road as an axis and strike out into areas east of the A9.

The soldiers could reach the key town Nedunkerny via Nainamadhu. With the 59 Division gaining momentum in Eastern Mullaitivu, there could be link-ups, thus strengthening the armed forces in that region.

Apart from the offensive aspect, there is also the defensive. With the armed forces rapidly moving north-westwards and northwards, the right flank is increasingly expanding and therefore becoming increasingly exposed.

When large areas of territory are seized and occupied too fast and too soon, the armed forces would necessarily be spread thin over broad regions.

### Rearguard action

Since most Army advances are on the west of the A9 and the LTTE controls much of the A9 Highway, the chances of infiltration and counter-strikes from the rear cannot be ruled out.

Many LTTE propagandists abroad are in fact attempting to convince the Tamil diaspora that the Tigers are deliberately retreating and letting the Army advance in order to infiltrate and attack in the future.

This explanation does not correspond to battlefield actualities but theoretically such LTTE rearguard action is certainly possible as long as the current status quo prevails in the ground situation.

But the fall of Palamottai could expedite Army advances along the A9. If that happens, the areas captured to the west of the A9 would be secured. The potential Tiger threat of infiltration and counterattack would be eliminated.

If these are the military benefits derived through the fall of Palamottai on August 28, another significant event on the same day took place on the Mullaitivu East coast.



The recent past has seen the 59 Division gaining ground in the hinterland and reaching the general area of Nithigaikulam, where LTTE Supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran was holed up for long periods during the Indian Army conflict.

The 59 Division has advanced further north of Andankulam in the hinterland and are about three kilometres south of a village called Kumulamunai. Further to the north and north east of Kumulamunai are the villages of Semmalai and Alampil, where the LTTE has several key installations.

Troops have also reached the southern shore of the Thannimurippukulam Tank, which is the fifth largest irrigation reservoir in the northern mainland. The Army is in control of about one kilometre around the tank at present.

The more important military advancement along the littoral was on Thursday, August 28. It was a combined Army-Navy operation. Sixteen Naval gunboats trained their guns on the sea shore between Kokuthoduvaai and Nayaruru lagoons. With this shell barrage support, soldiers of the 59 Division moved east about two kilometres towards the coast and then advanced further north up to the south of Nayaruru lagoon.

Thus the 59 Division for the first time has secured a coastal stretch of land between Kokuthoduvaai and Nayaruru. This area, about four kilometres long and two kilometres wide, is called Ulaathuveli in Tamil. The literal meaning is the "open space for sauntering." The conquest of the Ulaathuveli littoral is significantly important because it could be an indicator of the future.

#### Reaching Mullaitivu

If the Army, aided by the Navy and possibly the Air Force, moves forward along the coast while also maintaining a parallel track by gaining ground in the interior, the LTTE would be hard-pressed to prevent such forward movement.

Given the fact that Mullaitivu town is only about 12 to 15 kilometres from Alampil, the prospects of the armed forces soon reaching that town loom large, indeed. There is also the probability of the 59 Division linking up with the 56 Division at Nedunkerny if troops move eastwards from the A9 at some stage in the future.

If Palamottai and Ulaathuveli were the military achievements of August 28, the armed forces came up with another feat on the previous day (August 27).

This was by the 57 Division commanded by Major General Jagath Dias. The 57 succeeded in smashing LTTE defences in an area called Aalankulam on Wednesday, thereby linking up three separate areas and merging them together. It is necessary to delve into past military developments in order to discern the backdrop against which this event occurred. Hence a brief rerun of recent events.

The 58 Division or Task Force – 1, commanded by Brigadier Shavendra de Silva, has made rapid progress along the axis of A32 or the Mannar-Pooneryn Road. The 58 has progressed beyond Mannar District and has entered the Kilinochchi District littoral.

As stated in these columns earlier, the 58 Division adopted innovative military tactics by circumventing the elaborate LTTE defences set up in the south of besieged places. The soldiers cut across to the hinterland and then changed direction by turning again towards the west, thereby encircling the target area and coming up on the rear of the Tigers.

These simple yet effective manoeuvres worked well for the armed forces in taking Vidathaltheevu, Moondrampitty and Vellankulam in Mannar District.

The same practice was followed after the Kilinochchi District border was crossed as well. The 58 Division took the coastal area of Kallikudah and then paused on the south of the large, agrarian village Mulangaavil.

The 58 went eastwards and then turned westwards, engaging the Tigers in skirmishes in Adampankulam and Kariyalaimottai. Gradually Mulangaavil was encircled and taken on August 12.

Incidentally Mulangaavil had a large agricultural scheme for educated youths, set up during the United Front Government (UNF) of 1970-77. The scheme was taken over by the LTTE and turned into a steady provider of agricultural produce for the Tigers and dependents. Mulangaavil also has a large stadium and Great Heroes' (Maaveerar) Cemetery.

#### Taken by surprise

Thereafter, the Army went further northwards on the A32. The next important target was the coastal area of Nachikudah. There is a three kilometre long by-road going westwards from the A32 that leads to Nachikudah. The Tigers have set up elaborate defences in and around it as there is another Sea Tiger base in Nachikudah.

The 58 has stayed put on the doorstep of Nachikudah without trying to venture further westwards or northwards for the time being. Instead of trying to break through Nachikudah LTTE defences or attempting to circumvent them, the armed forces took the Tigers by surprise.

The 58 Division moved eastwards deep into the hinterland heading for Vannerikulam, which is almost parallel to Nachikudah. Currently the 58 is engaged in skirmishes with the LTTE in the east and west of Vannerikulam.

While the 58 adopted this tactic, the 57 Division too has deviated successfully from orthodox military procedure. On August 13, the day after Mulangaavil, the 57 Division troops seized Kalivilaan, about three kilometres to the south-west of strategic Thunukkaai.

Kalivilaan had been a tough nut to crack ever since 600 cadres belonging to an elite Special Forces fighting formation of the LTTE was inducted into the area under Lt. Col Vithees.

The elite Special Forces were redeployed from the Muhamaalai front and comprised cadres from the Charles Anthony and Imran-Pandian infantry regiments and the Chiruthai (Leopard) Commando Unit.





Vittees, however, was fatally wounded and died a few hours later on August 10 in the fighting to protect Kalivilaan. He was promoted posthumously as “Colonel” and buried in Kilinochchi.

Vittees, whose real name was Sathasivam Sathanandan, was born on May 8, 1971. A native of Vavuniya, Vittees joined the LTTE in 1991. He married Jeevana, a female cadre, and had three sons – Pavithran, Yaaranban and Kovarasan. Vittees was reputed for his skill in planning and fighting defensive battles. His performances in various battles in Muhamaalai and during ‘Operation Jayasikuru’ were noteworthy and so he had been specially selected to ‘defend’ Kalivilaan, Thunukkaai and Mallavi.

#### **Tremendous blow**

The death of Vittees was a tremendous blow that demoralised the LTTE greatly. On August 13, LTTE defences at Kalivilaan crumbled and the 57 Division took Kalivilaan. Thereafter, the LTTE launched six counter-strikes to retake Kalivilaan but failed.

Meanwhile, the 57 Division began a protracted campaign to encircle Thunukkaai and capture it. With the Tigers resisting fiercely, one troop contingent went northwards and reached the outskirts of Uyilankulam (different to Uyilankulam in Mannar District).

At a given point of time, the Army advanced from three directions towards Thunukkaai. Troops near Uyilankulam came from the north along a jungle track; troops came from the east along the Vellankulam-Mankulam Road axis from Kalivilaan; and troops from the south came from Ottankulam along the Panankaamam-Thunukkaai road axis. On August 22, the 57 Division succeeded in taking Thunukkaai. A few hours later, the Tigers abandoned Uyilankulam, which was also taken by the forces on the same day.

Once Thunukkaai along the Vellankulam-Mankulam Road was taken, the logical expectation was that the forces would proceed east on the same road and take Mallavi, which was already under siege.

Troops of the 57 Division were already stationed at two points close to Mallavi. One detachment had proceeded along the Paandiyankulam-Mallavi Road axis and was positioned in Karumpulliyam to the south of Paali Aaru.

Another detachment from the Vavunikulam area had progressed through Sivapuram, Paali Nagar, etc., on the Mallavi Road and reached Karuppikulam near the Pattupoochi (silkworm) Junction. The LTTE lines were behind the Vavunikulam tank’s first canal.

While these positions remained static despite mild frontline fluctuation, troops had also attempted another tactic to take Mallavi.

The Mankulam-Vellankulam Road goes eastwards through Mallavi and then reaches Aninjayakulam about two east of Mallavi. Thereafter it turns northwards at a place called Ottaruthakulam and goes through Vadakaadu to Vannivilaankulam and thereafter Mankulam.

In recent times troops have made forays into the general area of Ottaruthakulam. If successful, the Army could advance beyond Ottaruthakulam and then do a U-turn to close in on Mallavi from the rear.

#### **Unconventional tactics**

In this situation the expected course after seizing Thunukkaai would have been for the armed forces to head for Mallavi. But the 57, adopting unconventional tactics, sprung a surprise on the LTTE.

Instead of proceeding laterally to Mallavi from Thunukkaai along the Vellankulam-Mankulam axis, the soldiers belied expectations by heading northwards. Thunukkaai is a place where five roads and dirt tracks converge. The Tigers had a notorious detention cum torture camp there about a decade ago.

More than 8,000 persons have been detained by the LTTE at various times in Thunukkaai, of whom only a small number are among the living today. If an intensive search is conducted in the vicinity, the probability of mass graves being unearthed would be very high. Once again, Tiger inhumanity to fellow Tamils would be spotlighted.

When soldiers of 57 Division went northwards from Thunukkaai they reached the south of another irrigation tank, known as Akkaraayankulam.

Akkaraayan town is to the north of the tank and is 14 kilometres to the west of Kilinochchi town. Thus, the 57 Division has reached the closest point to Kilinochchi during this military campaign.

The forces also detected a half-built trench near Akkaraayan. Apparently the Tigers were constructing it to strengthen Akkaraayan defences but were taken by surprise when troops went off the beaten track.

Meanwhile, the LTTE forced to abandon Thunukkaai regrouped and consolidated defences at Aalankulam about three kilometres to the north-east of Thunukkaai. The 57 Division troops, however, continued to battle the Tigers at Aalankulam.

On August 27, the soldiers overran Aalankulam and by evening had linked up together the three geographically separate places of Thunukkaai, Uyilankulam and Aalankulam. With territorial non-contiguity removed, all three places are being amalgamated into a massive defence complex.

This act of linking and amalgamating captured areas by the Army shows that it is quite wary of the Tigers infiltrating through gaps. Besides, this manner of expanding control could help establish a viable and vibrant military presence in captured areas.

#### **Prize target**

The Army has set its sights on a number of places like Mallavi, Vannivilaankulam, Mankulam, Vannerikulam, Nachikudah, Nedunkerny, Puliyanakulam, Pallavarayankaddu, Poonagary, Kumulamunai, Alampil, Semmalai, etc., on either side of the A9.

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By opening up multiple fronts on a widespread basis, the military is somewhat like a gigantic octopus with tentacles spread far and wide. Usually guerrillas pick the time and place to launch attacks. But in the Wannai the Army has the LTTE on the defensive by diversifying targets and determining the time of attack.

The tables have been turned on the Tigers in the current phase of positional warfare in which the LTTE is basically defending and fighting a defensive war. It appears that the position would remain so for quite a while until and unless the Tigers change military strategy and strike back decisively.

[D.B.S. Jeyaraj can be reached on djeyaraj2005@yahoo.com](mailto:D.B.S.Jeyaraj.can.be.reached.on.djeyaraj2005@yahoo.com)

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