

Sri Lankan soldiers rebel as one army camp after another falls to the LTTE

Wije Dias

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In a sustained three-day offensive last week, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) captured three strategically important army camps from the Sri Lankan Army (SLA), taking control of 500 square kilometres of land in the northern district of Wanni.

According to unofficial figures, nearly 2,000 army and navy personnel, including many officers, were either killed or disappeared in a vain attempt to defend territory which it had taken the SLA three years and many lives to secure.

Reports from the front line indicate that the LTTE offensive produced a rebellion in the ranks of the government forces. According to one report, fleeing soldiers fired on military police when they tried to stop their retreat. In another incident, an army officer who ordered the soldiers not to leave was fired on and his bodyguard wounded.

Reflecting the nervousness in ruling circles over the soldiers' rebellion, the leader of the United National Party (UNP) parliamentary opposition, Ranil Wickramasinghe issued an urgent appeal to halt the retreat.

"I urge members of the security forces not to act individually but [to] follow the leadership of field commanders," he said. "Soldiers must act with restraint and obey their senior officers. The military has suffered because of the incorrect political leadership."

But this appeal failed to halt the desertions, which have not involved individuals but groups of soldiers numbering in the hundreds defying the orders of their officers.

Fleeing soldiers arriving in the border town of Vavuniya, without food or money, went on a rampage looting shops and businesses, especially liquor stores. Others were reported to be begging for money to pay for their bus fares to return home.

Soldiers who spoke to the journalists of the Tamil daily *Veerakesari* in Vavuniya said that even inside their bunkers they could not withstand the ferocious shelling by the LTTE and fled their posts. They told the newspaper they had gone to villages in the neighbouring areas to obtain civilian clothes before reaching the town.

The Peoples Alliance (PA) government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga imposed a ban on visits by journalists in response to the military debacle. But this failed to prevent the news from spreading and thousands of parents traveled long distances to reach the Anuradhapura and Poonani army camps in the North-Central Province where they demanded news about their soldier sons and daughters at the battlefield. Fearing a similar situation at the

Colombo Headquarters, the military announced seven telephone numbers through which information could be received as to the whereabouts of the soldiers in order to dissuade parents from coming to Colombo.

In a press release issued in London, the LTTE said that the military establishment and the state had refused "for political reasons" to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to accept the bodies of the dead soldiers and that the LTTE had been cremating them. The Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence refused to comment on the statement.

Adding insult to injury, the military then told the press that some soldiers had committed suicide by shooting themselves.

The rout of the SLA is one of the worst setbacks suffered by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the 16-year civil war against the LTTE, and the biggest military defeat since the PA government came to power five years ago.

The debacle began with a decision by the Sri Lankan military to launch an offensive on October 14, one week before president Kumaratunga announced the calling of a snap presidential poll.

No doubt the PA regime calculated that some new military victories would strengthen it in the presidential poll due to be held on December 21. Its aim was to win Sinhala nationalist elements and prove that its so-called "war for peace" was capable of bringing the LTTE to the bargaining table.

Coupled with the military offensive, the PA launched a political initiative seeking to win support from defectors from the UNP. While the political initiative has enjoyed some success, with five UNP members of parliament and more than two dozen of its local leaders declaring their support for Kumaratunga, the military operation, codenamed "Operation Watershed" has backfired badly.

Faced with unprecedented losses in such a short period of time, the PA regime sought to cover up the extent of the LTTE offensive.

After remaining silent for two days after the first attack on the Odusuddan camp, the news release issued by army headquarters on the night of November 2 said: "The LTTE who suffered heavy casualties and losses during the past few weeks due to offensive operations by security forces, launched a major attack on security forces forward defence in and around Odusuddan in the early hours of yesterday."

But by the time this statement was issued, the Operational Headquarters of the Army knew very well that within 10 minutes of the attack on Odusuddan army camp it had been overrun by the

LTTE. When the LTTE breached the defence line of the Odusuddan army camp, on November 1, the more than 2,000 soldiers stationed there had either been killed or had fled leaving their weapons behind.

The LTTE took hold of all the weapons and ammunition, including armored cars, tanks and communications equipment and transported them in Sri Lankan Army trucks to their main base at Mullativu, on the north-east coast.

Another army news release issued after the fall of both the Odusuddan and Nedunkerni camps said: "Heavy fighting continues in general area Odusuddan. Security forces are involved in clearing operations and also establishing links with the flanking units. After heavy fighting security forces are regrouping for further operations in general area Odusuddan in order to flush out isolated enemy pockets."

However, after four days, the same military source declared: "After heavy confrontations security forces have fallen back tactically to areas south of Odusuddan and Nedunkerni."

LTTE statements issued by its London office and broadcast on the *Voice of LTTE* radio news service contradicted the military falsifications on a daily basis.

Within 24 hours of the first attack on Odusuddan a news bulletin issued by LTTE's London office said: "Hundreds of Sri Lankan troops have been killed and several hundreds injured as the fighting units of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam overran the Sri Lankan military complex at Odusuddan this morning and took control of the strategically important town and its surrounding areas situated along the Mankulam Mullativu highway."

The next day, announcing the fall of the Nedunkerni army camp, the *Voice of LTTE* declared: "In this war we captured armored cars and tanks, large number of military vehicles, other heavy weapons and communication equipment."

On November 6, the LTTE in its radio news reported: "Through these attacks by our operation *Oayatha Alaigal* (Incessant Waves) two large military bases, six main military camps, 16 mini-camps and hundreds of sentry points were destroyed. LTTE re-captured more than 20 villages."

While seeking to use the debacle for its own immediate ends in the presidential campaign, the UNP, conscious of the dangers facing the state, has been somewhat restrained in its rhetoric. In an address to a public meeting on November 7 UNP leader Wickramasinghe called on the president to "hand over the commanding position of the forces to a person who can enjoy the confidence of all without letting down the morale of the troops and drawing the nation to a catastrophe."

Meanwhile, the PA government has launched a court of inquiry headed by three senior officers from the three armed forces to inquire into the incidents that took place in the operational area. This is an attempt to find scapegoats for the grave military setbacks. Press reports citing "informed sources" have appeared suggesting that "the multi-pronged enemy attacks could have been halted if the top brass in the theatre acted swiftly."

The government has also ordered a reshuffle of commanders at the front placing officers known for their ruthlessness in charge of the Wanni area. In addition all armed forces personnel on leave have been ordered to return to their respective units.

But serious concerns have been voiced in ruling circles about the ability of the PA regime to restore the armed forces to meet the situation and calls for the formation of a national government have become louder and more frequent.

The Upali group of companies, which publishes the *Island* daily paper and which was virulently opposed to any linkage with the PA, has called for a political package to settle the war. In an editorial published last Sunday it declared: "Given what is happening in the war front and other very disturbing developments that have been taking place with the breakdown in discipline among some of the withdrawing troops, and reports that the government is about to attempt to engage the LTTE in a dialogue, not from the much touted position of strength the country has heard so much about but from a situation of distinct weakness, it is necessary that President Kumaratunga rises above self and decides if the national interest so demands to invite the UNP proper to form a National Government and do what has to be done at this decisive moment."

The style of the language reflects the growing desperation in these circles.

Fears are also being openly expressed over the possibility that the LTTE may move its forces further to the south to reach Vavuniya, the main border town controlled by the Colombo regime and inhabited by a large Sinhala population.

But according to information received from a group of UN agency officials now trapped in Wanni, the LTTE may have other plans. In a radio message sent to Colombo, they said that they had spoken to some LTTE leaders about the latest attacks and that one of them had explained that the aim was to drive the security forces away to defensive positions that existed before "Operation Jayasikuru" (Operation Victory Assured). If this is the case, the intention of the LTTE is to stop at the borders they held in June 1997 from where they could possibly work out a deal with the Colombo regime.

Whatever the attempts made to play down the extent of the losses, not to mention the continuing cost of the war, the debacle suffered by the SLA in the first week of this month, will have far-reaching political implications for the PA regime and the Sri Lankan state itself.



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