

With no military options, government buys time offering watered down devolution

By J. S. Tissainayagam

Northeastern Monthly, November 2006

Those following military affairs would no doubt know that after the Muhamalai debacle on 11 October this year, the Sri Lankan security forces have fought shy of going on the offensive in the North. What is more, the embarrassment suffered in the hands of the LTTE led to frantic damage control in the form of denial of involvement by senior members of the security forces, thereby attributing the drubbing to an ill-conceived exercise of ambitious individual/s rather than the failure of a collective decision.

Though attempts were made to wipe the military's image clean, sources from within the army admit that it has profoundly affected military morale. It is reported that thinking at the level of the middle, and even upper grade officer cadre of the Sri Lankan army is that the armed forces should refrain from undertaking ambitious operations in the North because of the reversals such offensives have tended to suffer.

The obvious parallel of the Muhamalai episode of an offensive going wrong is Agni Kheela in 2001 where, once again, the army advanced with the intention of recapturing Elephant Pass it had lost in April the previous year but was driven back.

These experiences have led to very conservative thinking in the military, especially the army, that not only are they prone to fighting losing battles whenever they go on the offensive in the North, but that such military setbacks affect their performance even when they get into defensive mode. In other words, the confidence the capture of Sampur and the clearing of Muttur gave the military establishment has been largely neutralised.

With this in mind, it appears that any new offensive on Elephant Pass is very unlikely in the near future. The military believes that Elephant Pass is too close to the Wannai, which is the heartland as far as the LTTE is concerned for many reasons, military, political and administrative, and likely to be fiercely contested. Therefore, no adventures in that region are being contemplated by the government.

To military decision-makers Vaharai, in the east, presents an entirely different equation. Its significance is an extension of the importance of capturing Sampur earlier this year: to drive the LTTE from the east so that government naval movements and merchant shipping that supply the military in Jaffna are protected from interdiction by the Tigers.

Deluded into thinking that if it was able to capture Sampur and the area commanding the mouth of Trincomalee harbour, sea movements would be safe from the LTTE, the government overran it at the cost of hundreds of civilian lives and thousands suffering displacement. But the fact remains that despite losing Sampur, the Sea Tigers, operating

from Chalai and other stations in Mullaitivu have harried the government's movements by sea.

Realising this, the government is determined to capture as much territory as possible that is in the hands of the Tigers along the eastern seaboard. It is not much considering that the government already has under its control Kokilai and Nayaru near Weli Oya (Manal Aru), Trincomalee and the Muttur-Sampur areas, while further down it controls the entire coastal belt south of Mankerny-Cadjuwatte. The only area now under the Tigers is Vaharai-Kathiraveli that is between Pannichankerny, where no-man's land ends, and the Verugal river. If Vaharai is taken, the security forces will have control of the littoral spanning the entire eastern sea.

The government however has miscalculated when thinking the Tigers will give up Vaharai because it is far from their northern heartland of the Wannu. To the LTTE Vaharai is strategically too important to give up without a fight. The reasons for this are manifold. The most important is of course that of military supplies. Vaharai, despite the vigilance of the navy, continues to be a conduit for military supplies, which are vital if the Tigers are to function as a military outfit capable of conventional warfare. Fighting in this mode requires arsenals having to be constantly replenished. If such supplies lines are interdicted, the Tigers might have to return to a guerrilla mode of struggle.

Second, Vaharai becomes vital if the LTTE has plans of clearing Batticaloa. An operation of that sort will need a staging post where artillery can be positioned, supplies secured and personnel mustered, which also has access to the sea. What is more, there is also access from Vaharai overland to areas west of the Batticaloa lagoon (Paduwankarai), which remains under Tiger control. It has to be said however that right now the crossing point into Paduwankarai, which is near Welikanda, is under the control of the security forces.

Finally, Vaharai is also significant to keep the pressure on the military if the Tigers want to regain the Sampur area and re-establish their control over Trincomalee harbour. Therefore, Vaharai as a staging post and fall back position is of vital importance to the LTTE, which is obviously why it is contesting its capture.

After the fall of Sampur, over 40,000 Tamil internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled south into Vaharai, which was (and remains) LTTE-controlled territory. While pursuing limited military offensives the government has concentrated on trying to push civilians (both IDPs and residents) living in Vaharai to leave the area by shelling it relentlessly. The school in Kathiraveli used as an IDP camp where 47 persons were killed was one such place that became victim to the army's continuous shelling.

Such offensives against the civilians are accompanied by attempts to starve the population by refusing them food as well as medicines and fuel, with the hope of driving out the people of Vaharai and depopulating it. As this story is being written Vaharai is being subject to intense shelling and aerial bombardment.

Following the fall of Sampur and their retreat southwards, the government was of the view that the Tigers were boxed in, in the Kathiraveli-Vaharai areas between the army camps in Kallar and Mahindapura in the north, and Mankerny in the south. The security forces have attempted to break into the Vaharai area on different instances but the offensives have proved abortive. One such was in late September when they advanced from Mankerny up to Pannichankerny and were beaten back. Later they tried to enter Kathiraveli through Kattumurive, which also failed. The most recent attempt was in the second week in December when an advance from Kallar and Mahindapura camps towards the Verugal was broken with the army taking heavy casualties, 24 dead and four missing. With this string of defeats one cannot but speculate whether the same fatalism that besets the army in the North against going on offensives operations will be replicate in the East too!

When LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran made his Great Heroes' Day address on 27 November, he was only too well aware of the strategic importance of Vaharai and as to why the government was blockading it. It was the frustration that the government, supported by sections of the international community, was not giving space for meaningful dialogue that forced him to utter dire threats about reverting back to a struggle for political independence. The prospect for the government pursuing a steady course of action appears bleak. On the one hand, the hardliners led by the secretary ministry of defence, Gotabaya Rajapakse, and the army commander, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, behave like hawks, but the military's performance to give substance to such hawkish thinking on the battlefield has been found wanting.

On the other hand, the government is not in a position to return to the negotiating table without a military victory because it will mean negotiating from a position of weakness and incurring the wrath of the Sinhala chauvinists. Caught in this politico-military dilemma, the government is resorting to a game by appearing to be conciliatory - it has got the Experts' Committee of the All Party Conference (APC) to make public its proposals for the devolution of power. The Rajapakse administration hopes to use it to buy time, while trying to hatch some other military move.

Meanwhile, a problem that is going to take its toll on the army is the lack of trained personnel to engage in active combat especially if the conflict spreads. What is more, the army also has to hold areas such as Muttur and Sampur it has wrested out of the Tigers. The issue of engaging the LTTE in multiple fronts might well become the army's Achilles heel.