

General

Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) organised a talk on 'Terrorism and Guerilla War in Sri Lanka' on 19 April 2012 at CLAWS Conference Room. The talk was delivered by Dr SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda. Dr N Manoharan, Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) was the discussant. The talk was attended by serving and retired officers and members of the strategic community.

Dr SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda

Suicide attacks by LTTE in Sri Lanka had a tremendous impact on the psyche of the nation's leadership and of its people. It eroded the nation's political fabric and sapped the courage of the military and political elite. This in turn degraded the moral strength of the public to unite, rally, stand up and fight against an enemy organisation seeking to destroy the Sri Lankan state. Organised use of violence for political ends was directed primarily at noncombatants. The violence was premeditated and planned to achieve specific ends. This tactic proved largely successful for the LTTE and forced the country's political and military leadership on the back foot. This was the prevailing characteristic of the conflict for a long period of time.

In 1987, the government of J.R .Jayawardene, under Indian pressure called off the Vadamarachchi offensive when it was on the verge of success, signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and accepted the reality of Indian intervention in Sri Lanka. The subsequent administration of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga proved to be no different. After a series of military reverses and an attempt on her life in 1999, a visibly shaken Kumaratunga lost her nerve. Calling off the war, she did everything she could to prevent a resumption of hostilities, remaining inactive even when her Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar was murdered in 2005.

The change in the situation came about with the appointment of General Sarath Fonseka, as the Commander of the Sri Lankan Army. The LTTE were aware of the threat posed by the General as in their eyes he was one of the few men left who was capable of destroying their organisation. Within a short time embarked on a far reaching reorganisation of the army. However, he was injured in a suicide attack, and was lucky to escape with his life. This had a profound effect on him. Well known in army circles for his tenacious and unrelenting nature, the General refused to buckle under threats. The history of the Eelam War was replete with instances of the LTTE using assassination as a tool to break the morale of the Sri Lankan government and undermine its willingness and ability to fight. This tried and tested method however not only failed this time but hardened the General's determination and resolve. In trying to kill Fonseka, the LTTE had created a driving, implacable enemy. Subsequently, the assassination attempt on

the President's brother convinced the Lankan leadership that they would never be safe while the LTTE remained in being and convinced them that this was a struggle which had to be fought to the finish; only then could a lasting peace be achieved.

A characteristic of insurgencies is that even though security forces may win various engagements it does not translate into victory. This is because merely defeating a guerilla in encounters does not undermine the latter's basic goal of survival. A guerilla can thus be said to be winning even if he suffers significant casualties, so long as he does not lose decisively. In the past, every military operation against the LTTE had focused on specific areas only. As a result the LTTE had been able to extricate itself, regain its strength and redeploy. The Army hence changed its tactics to attacking along multiple axes with multiple targets. This kept the LTTE guessing and in marked contrast to previous campaigns, it was now faced with the dilemma of where the next attack could come. By engaging in multiple prongs, the Army prevented the LTTE from switching forces and denied to him the space and freedom which it had come to take for granted. The LTTE had earlier relied on long intervals between each and every operation which allowed them to rest, rebuild and regain their strength. To put pressure on the LTTE, the Sri Lankan Army resorted to continuous operations regardless of weather and terrain constraints. The campaign was fought during the monsoon, often in pouring rain and oceans of mud and this allowed the LTTE no time to rest and recoup.

A flaw in the LTTE strategy was that it lost sight of the fact that its strength lay in using terrorism as a political weapon to achieve certain ends. LTTE saw violence only as a military weapon. This appeared to be its undoing. On the other hand, there was a marked improvement in the leadership of the Sri Lankan forces. The belief in the leadership, both political and military, ran all the way through the ranks, breeding a sense of confidence and trust. This played a vital role in the ultimate victory.

Problems faced by army troops related to operating in different terrain types and in different weather conditions. In semi urban areas the challenges were complex as the LTTE could channelise government forces into selected killing areas. In the Jaffna Peninsula & in the Northeast, fighting took place in arid semi desert conditions of the Jaffna peninsula. Temperatures rose to 40 degrees celsius, water was scarce and shade limited. Flat, open terrain imposed a different set of challenges. The monsoon rains added to the difficulty, as areas became waterlogged and marshy. This led to many casualties amongst troops.

By concentrating the people and the cadres together, the LTTE however exposed itself, making the army's job far more straightforward. Had the civilian population been left in place, the task would have been far more difficult and infinitely more complex. A much greater number of troops would have been needed to secure the areas under the army's control. It would also have been far more difficult to target the guerillas if the

villagers had remained amidst the newly occupied territories. The advancing troops themselves would have been far less secure and much more vulnerable. Instead of advancing, they might have had to take a more defensive approach. Indeed, a campaign which had been completed in less than three years might still be continuing today.

Dr N Manoharan, Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF)

As long as the LTTE was around, political settlement of the ethnic issue was on the cards. But, after the Tigers' defeat, the Tamil community has become totally irrelevant to Colombo. This does not mean that one is advocating for a revival of Tamil militancy. The point is that the demise of the LTTE is a step in the right direction to resolve the long-standing grievances of Tamils. It should be taken as a golden opportunity to establish peace and development in the island, instead of indirectly suggesting that 'we would only listen to those who pickup arms'. The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora is indeed vociferous, but has not been able to do much on the ground towards pressurising Colombo to heed to their demands. Its voice is expected to become feeble in the coming months and years.

Proper reintegration of former militants back into mainstream society is one of the vital components of rebuilding post-conflict societies. In the Sri Lankan case, it is all the more important given the character of the LTTE, a secretive, ruthless and uncompromising militant group.

Discussion

- Resolving the prevailing humanitarian crisis is vital for both military and political reasons. Military success is not complete without addressing humanitarian concerns.
- Demographically, the Sri Lankan Tamil community is perhaps on the verge of losing the status of being the largest minority group of the island. In the last island-wide census taken in 1981, it registered at over 12 per cent of the total population. This was when the armed conflict had not broken out. But the latest headcount reveals the community to be around 7-8 per cent due to exodus, emigration, deaths, and even concealment of identity.
- If the humanitarian crisis remains unaddressed, it will be difficult to arrive at a meaningful and lasting political solution for the ethnic issue.