

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) organised a talk on 'Defeating Insurgency in the 21st Century: Can the Sri Lankan Model be Replicated?' on 25 August 2011 at the Centre's premises. While Maj Gen Ashok Mehta (Retd), former GOC 57 Mtn Division, Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), made an elaborate presentation on the subject, Mr Rajesh Sundaram, Editor (Assignments), Headlines Today, spoke as a discussant. Maj Gen Dhruv Katoch (Retd), Additional Director, CLAWS, chaired the proceedings that commenced with Welcome Remarks by Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd). Serving and retired officers of the armed forces and government and members of the strategic community attended the event.

### **Chairperson's Initial Remarks:**

When you speak of insurgency in this part of the world, every country has its own style of handling it. In the recent past, Sri Lanka has been militarily successful in defeating the LTTE. But, only time will tell, how far that military victory gets translated into a political one. Gen Ashok Mehta, who is speaking on the subject has not only served as a division commander of the IPKF in Sri Lanka but has also been closely following all developments in Sri Lanka since then and has visited the country often. Mr Rajesh Sundaram, of Headlines Today, has been covering Sri Lanka for over a decade, especially the 'Eelam War IV' and human rights violations perpetrated by the combatants.

### **Maj Gen Ashok Mehta (Retd)**

Victory over the Tamil Tigers by the Sri Lankan security forces was absolute. In the process, Sri Lanka has set a new paradigm in the use of force by winning the first counter-insurgency in the 21st century. But the victory incurred enormous military and civilian fatalities, accompanied by humanitarian and diplomatic costs. Colombo did however demonstrate that any insurgency can be subdued by the right mix of strategy, political will, adequate resources and all out use of force, along with conducive geo-strategic environment. What is most striking is not the defeat of the LTTE as an organised military force, but also the decapitation of Tiger leadership.

Sri Lankans at one point did not believe that they would achieve unassailable military victory over the LTTE, considered world's most ruthless terrorist organisation. India, which two decades earlier had intervened in Sri Lanka to quell the insurgency, stayed away this time. Even New Delhi did not expect outright military victory from Colombo. The Malayan experience is often cited as a textbook example of successful counter-insurgency. More recently, Chechnya and Colombia figure among success stories, but they are yet to finish off the insurgents completely.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Army Commander Gen Sarath Fonseka were the architects of this historic victory. The LTTE

rose to become not only the world's deadliest terrorist organisation, but was also 30,000-strong movement with an army, air force and navy, each with suicide squads and running a parallel state. It occupied one-fourth of the territory and two-thirds of the coastline in the north and the east of Sri Lanka. The LTTE was supported by an elaborate international network and funding of over \$200 million yearly. It adopted innovative tactics in conventional, guerilla and terrorist acts. A serious mismatch, however, existed between military and political wings of the organisation, dominated by one man – Prabhakaran. Killing former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was a strategic blunder made by the LTTE.

There were many drivers of military operations. One, when four attempts of negotiations and three military campaigns ended in a stalemate, President Rajapaksa wanted to make one final effort to break the stalemate. Two, the Tigers repeatedly violated the 2002 ceasefire agreement and blocked Mavilaru sluice gates in July 2006. Army's attempts to release the water turned into military operations in the east. Third, the Tigers targeted Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Army chief Sarath Fonseka with suicide bombers making the war more personal. Four, vertical split of the LTTE in 2004 resulted in nearly 6000 cadres deserting the organisation under Karuna. Five, thanks to credible Indian intelligence, several supply ships of the LTTE were sunk by the Sri Lankan Navy on high seas resulting in a body blow to the Tigers' supply lines and war-waging capability.

Sri Lanka had learnt through previous experiences that managing India's support by what they call as "benevolent neutrality" and deflecting Tamil Nadu factor was pivotal in any military success over the LTTE. Without India's help the LTTE's supply chain would not have been dismantled. New Delhi's cooperation and consent was orchestrated through diplomacy and skillful use of India's adversaries like China and Pakistan. Diplomacy also ensured ban of the LTTE in over 30 countries and denying anti-aircraft missiles and other weapons to the Tigers. President Rajapaksa cobbled a rare political consensus with major political parties. At the same time, a number of steps were taken to transform the military that was once described as "funk". The Army was restructured and strengthened; the navy and the air force were modernised. Military procurement was put on fast track, personally monitored by the President. There was no political interference in military operations. There was also an international environment after 9/11 that saw all insurgencies as "terrorism". Colombo managed to project Eelam War IV as the "largest hostage situation in the history" and the "world's greatest rescue operations" from "world's deadliest terrorist organisation".

The LTTE failed to fully realise the 9/11 effect when the international community moved against all armed groups. The Tigers were constrained in raising funds and acquiring arms; it was critically deficient of surface-to-air missiles bestowing air supremacy on the security forces. Faced with multi-directional attacks and shrinking manpower, the LTTE

was forced to fight conventional war. Surprisingly, it had no Plan-B. The Army, on the other hand, employed a mix of guerilla and conventional tactics. Using the strong intelligence network, and small infantry operating teams it could penetrate the LTTE areas. The momentum of fighting was kept up by raising and induction of new fighting formations.

According to several international organisations, serious human rights violations occurred especially during the final stages of the war and some of them constitute war crimes. Sri Lanka has however rejected all charges of human rights abuses and refused to accept independent international investigations on allegations of war excesses. The government has thus alienated itself from the West and in turn lost trade concessions and other forms of aid. The military victory in Sri Lanka has also led to Sinhala nationalism, triumphalism and authoritarianism. Sri Lanka's new friends now are Libya, Myanmar, Iran, China and Pakistan.

There are three sets of figures on war casualties. According to the MoD, 22,000 LTTE were killed and 10,000 injured. 6000 security forces personnel were also killed. Figures for civilian casualties have a wide variance. The Hindustan Times puts the casualties at 20,000; The London Times at 40,000; The Sri Lankan Peace Secretariat at 3000 to 5000; The ICG at 75,000. Surprisingly, President Rajapaksa believes they were zero.

Sri Lanka's growth was negatively impacted by the long drawn war against the LTTE, and remained stuck at 4-5 per cent. It is likely to increase to 8 per cent with the return of peace and tourism. Expenditure incurred by the Sri Lankan military to win the war is reportedly \$5.5 billion. This in terms of the surge expected in the economy is a very small sum to return the country to high powered growth.

Some lessons from the military victory are as under: -

1. The combination of military superiority, strong political will, popular domestic support and favourable international environment were indispensable for Sri Lanka's military victory.
2. Military victory is incomplete without political reconciliation and root causes being addressed. Colombo is now trying to underplay devolution. This may have serious long term ramifications for peace.
3. Sri Lanka made the strategic choice of employment of strategic force as preferable to a long drawn peace process. Ironically, it is being called to justify its military success given the questions being asked by the international community.

4. Sri Lanka was able to stonewall attempts to premature ceasefire and possible surrender of the LTTE. Equally, it has prevented criticism of its human rights record at the UN Human Rights Council, thanks to China and Russia.

5. While in India, the military tends to create conditions for political solutions, Sri Lanka's use of disproportionate force was arguably justified to end the war quickly and on its terms.

6. While Sri Lanka won the shooting war, it lost the information war, failing to shape the international narrative. It was charged for the slow pace of rehabilitation of IDPs and reconstruction of former conflict areas.

7. In the face of military actions against insurgency, it is important to keep the democracy intact. The prize of victory and costs of success should be weighed properly.

In conclusion, Sri Lanka must face the international community including the UN for excesses committed if closure has to be obtained. Replicating the Sri Lanka model is not an option for India, and neither is such a course advisable.

### **Mr Rajesh Sundaram**

Sri Lankan Army is almost 100 percent constituted by Sinhalese, while the LTTE represented the Tamil minority community. It is in this perspective that the military operations have to be looked at. The prospect of revival of the LTTE is very much possible from the rehabilitation camps, and due to denial of political rights to Tamils. The latest position of the Sri Lankan government is not in favour of devolution of powers to the Tamil minority community. Even former LTTE leaders like KP are emphasising on rehabilitation and not on devolution.

Sri Lanka is not ready to allow any third party investigations on excesses during the war. It maintains that an internal mechanism like Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) is more than enough to look into all issues of reconciliation. However, this body is not mandated to look at serious human rights allegations, especially those highlighted by the Channel 4 documentary. None of the senior military commanders have been questioned by the LLRC. The way forward is to set a deadline for the LLRC process as suggested by the West. Most likely the LLRC is going to miss its November deadline. That would further widen the rift between Sri Lanka and western powers. Sri Lankans believe that some countries from Africa, Southeast Asia, China and India would come to their support.

The rise of Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka was basically because of unitary nature of Sri Lankan constitution that refused to share powers with its minorities. Given the fact that the present Sri Lankan government is not ready to talk of devolution, the future looks

very grim. Talks between Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the government of Sri Lanka have hit a dead end. Many Tamil moderates expect agitations to commence gradually as non-violent resistance and, depending on government's response, may slip into militancy. Tamil diaspora has enough money and clout to support any revival. Hence, Colombo has stepped up monitoring and militarisation of Tamil-dominated Northeast. The diaspora may also lobby hard for an international investigation on the war.

It is easy to brush aside human rights abuses during last stages of war as propaganda by the LTTE proxies, but that will not in any way help the reconciliation process. Conditions in relief camps are not up to the mark and rehabilitation is far from satisfactory. These do not send good signals to the Tamils. The government has not won the Tamils over, which is evident by results of local elections mostly won by TNA. A good starting point in the reconciliation process is to get to the truth; identify those responsible for excesses and punish them. Root causes should be addressed at the earliest. If the Sri Lankan government is confident that there were no human rights violations, it should permit an international investigation. Instead of blindly supporting Sri Lanka in the international forum, India has to take a moral stand. Tamils look upon India as their mother. Therefore, New Delhi's stand is critical. The bigger picture should not be missed out. Rajapaksa brothers have to face international investigations. In the long run, justice must be done if peace is to prevail.

## **Discussion**

The following points emerged during the open discussion that ensued presentations:

- In Sri Lanka, it may be difficult to see militancy growing within the rehabilitation camps due to tightened security.
- Sri Lanka is the most militarized place in the world. Military operations are still going on in Wanni to look for hidden weapons and remnant/fugitive LTTE cadres. That is the reason why the Sri Lankan state is trying to maintain high security zones and heavy military presence in the Tamil dominated areas.
- The signs of revival of Tamil militancy have already emerged in the form of non-violent protests. This is how it commenced 60 years back. So, the history repeating itself cannot be ruled out.
- Sri Lankan economy is looking good. As Sri Lankans are diversifying their exports, they may not be affected by the ongoing global economic recession. Their bonds, stock market, tourism, and reconstruction work that are taking place with international funding are helping the economy to grow at over eight percent.

- The lurking fear that used to be there in Sri Lanka earlier is absent now. Military victory might have been achieved, but hearts and minds of Tamils have not been won. This is evident of TNA electoral victory in the recent local elections. However, revival of the LTTE, as of now, looks remote.
- Plantations Tamils are, as always, ignored. There are chances of revival of militancy from there. In that case, the government may find it difficult to counter it.
- India certainly has lost leverage in Sri Lanka, but the present regime under Rajapaksa has not crossed redlines. The Sri Lankans will not do anything that hurts core Indian interests.
- Regimes are not going to subject themselves to supervision or investigation by other states. Only when the people of states themselves decide to reconcile, the existing ethnic rift will disappear.
- There is a possibility of change in the present mindset of Colombo if pressure from Tamil Nadu on Indian government to do something on the ethnic issue increases, if there is a government change in Colombo, and if international sanctions are imposed. The LLRC report that is expected in November may push fence sitters to the other side. But as long as Russia and China wield their veto, the effect of international sanctions will be very limited.
- The possibility of an independent Tamil state is gone with the defeat of the LTTE.
- India went along with Sri Lanka due to some strategic compulsions, but without any quid pro quo. This was a mistake.
- India simply cannot replicate Sri Lanka model in its fight against insurgencies. Our military can only create ideal conditions for political solutions, but not enforce any military solutions to political problems.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

One key factor that led to Sri Lankan victory was isolation of the battlefield to which India also helped in a great manner. Weakening the enemy by splitting is another important lesson that comes out of Sri Lankan experience. Yet another aspect is focused training of men to achieve the larger objective. Tamils have to be given their due rights without which the issue is not going to be resolved. The Sri Lankan military has won only the battle, but it is up to its government to win the war.